

COLD WAR  1945-1991



DIEN BIEN PHU

THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR, 1946-1954

ANTHONY TUCKER-JONES

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Pen & Sword
MILITARY

In memory of Bernard de Lattre de Tassigny (1928–1951)
Croix de Guerre and Médaille Militaire

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
PEN AND SWORD MILITARY
an imprint of
Pen and Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire S70 2AS

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ISBN 978 1 52670 798 7

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Typeset by Aura Technology and Software Services, India
Editing and additional sourcing of photographs Gerry van Tonder
Maps, drawings and militaria in the colour section by Colonel Dudley Wall
Printed and bound in Malta by Gutenberg

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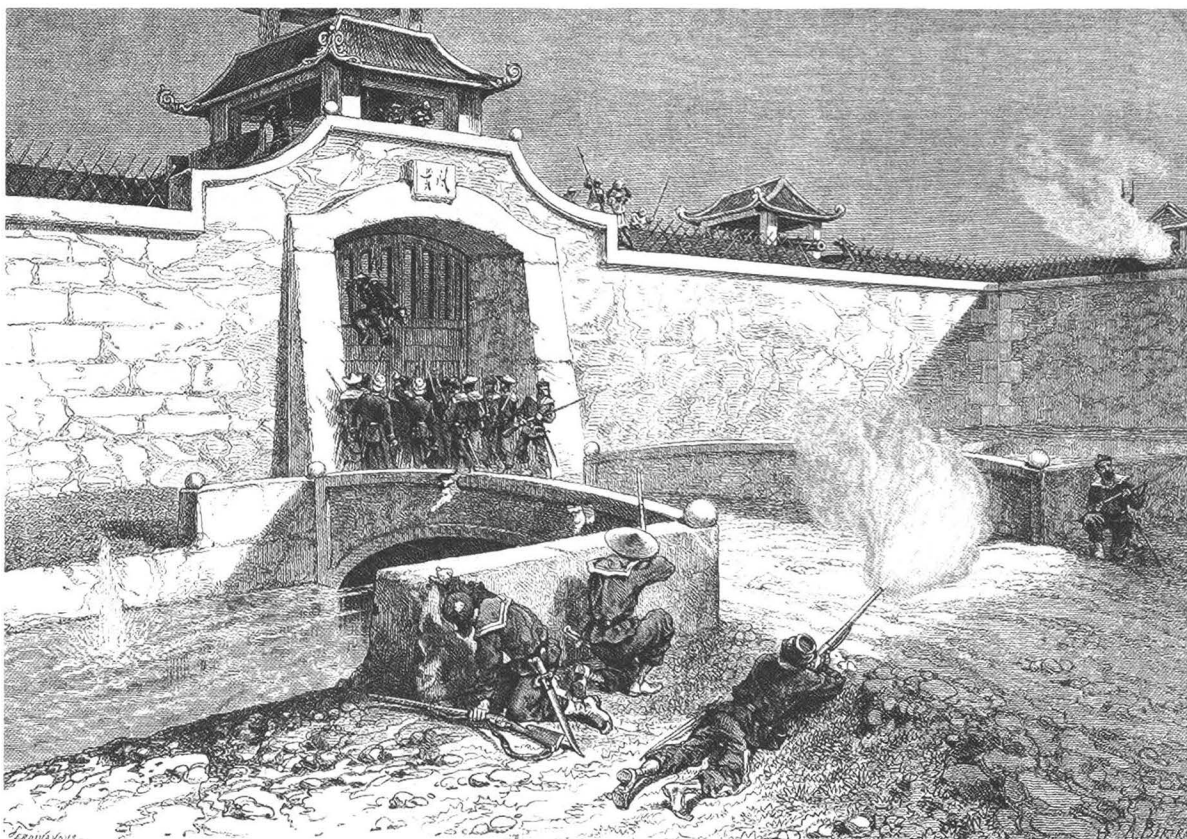
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PROLOGUE – ‘WHERE’S BERNARD?’

Just as the Cold War was starting, a young man by the name of Bernard de Lattre arrived in Indochina in 1949. He was a lieutenant in the French Army and a decorated Second World War hero. Bernard was a graduate of the École Militaire Interarmes and, like many of his generation, had volunteered to fight the new menace to world peace – communism. Such a decision was not universally popular at home and France had banned conscripts from shedding their blood in this distant land. His presence was to spark tragedy for him, his family and his country.

Bernard epitomized France’s young officer class. He believed in leadership by example and from the front. At 16, he had been wounded fighting the Germans on 8 September 1944 at Atun, for which he was awarded a medal for gallantry. Five years later, still eager for combat, he had volunteered to go to Tonkin in northern Indochina. There, in the face of a burgeoning Vietnamese guerrilla war, he despaired at the lax and uninspired military leadership around him. He urged his father, a famous general in the French army, to come and help, the troops needed him. Then on 30 May 1951, Bernard found himself sharing a sand-bagged dugout, protected by barbed wire, overlooking Ninh Binh on the Day River. Victory was at hand, or so it seemed.



Capture of Hanoi in the 1870s.

INTRODUCTION – IMPERIAL HUBRIS

The revving engines of the cargo planes lined up on the airfield and taxiways were deafening. Across from them were rows and rows of tough-looking paratroopers in their camouflaged uniforms, waiting for the green light. Their faces were a mixture of apprehension, fear and excitement. For most this was not their first jump, but you just never knew what would happen when you hit a drop zone. There is a universal military saying that the plan never survives contact with the enemy. Once lumbering into the sky, each aircraft was packed with eighteen sweating men and all their combat kit, ready for the jump.

The men of the Viet Minh 148th Regiment were on exercise when they were alerted by the steady drone of engines overhead. Something big was about to happen. Their first thought was that bombs were about to fall, obliterating everything in their path. Even worse, it might be the terrible furnace-like fireballs created by exploding napalm. Instead, thousands of parachutes began to billow in the blue sky. They looked like the annual flower blossoms floating in the Perfume river that flows through the ancient Vietnamese city of Hue. Each flower, though, carried a deadly speck beneath it, an enemy soldier, a French soldier. Soon there was the sporadic sound of gun fire. The outnumbered Viet Minh were forced to withdraw – round one to the French.

This is the story of imperial hubris and a place called Dien Bien Phu. It was a village of no great consequence located in a valley in northwestern Vietnam, not far from the border with Laos. Thanks to the Nam Youm (Nam Rom) River, the broad and very flat flood plain surrounded by jungle-covered hills is very verdant. In this valley, the French convinced themselves they could triumph once and for all over Vietnam's communist nationalists.

This is also the story of France's generals: de Gaulle, Leclerc, de Lattre, Salan, Navarre and Cogny, who were committed to maintaining the ideal of the French Union at any cost. They were involved in a long and brutal war in French colonial Indochina that resulted in such a decisive battle that it led to the international humiliation of France and heralded the end of the French Union. It also sowed the deadly seeds of the subsequent Vietnam War.

French Indochina consisted of five separate kingdoms: Tonkin (northern Vietnam), Annam (central Vietnam), Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), Laos and Cambodia, that had been fused together as part of the vast French empire. It was the Japanese occupation of part of northern Indochina in 1940 that precipitated America's entry into the Second World War the following year. However, the Japanese did not occupy all of Indochina until early 1945, by which time the war was coming to a close. It was the resumption of French colonial rule by force that sparked the First Indochina War, which culminated in France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

This colonial conflict was fought against the backdrop of the Cold War, an almost forgotten postscript to the Second World War. From 1945 until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, ideological and military tensions between East and West regularly threatened to drag the world into another catastrophic global conflict. This was narrowly avoided on numerous occasions, thanks only to the spectre of nuclear war. Instead, the Cold War became a series of widespread proxy conflicts that often had little to do with the initial armed stand-off in Europe.



Japanese troops enter Saigon, 1941.

Europe was in economic and political chaos after 1945 – the far left spearheaded by the communists and socialists thought it was their time to overturn the established order. However, the international community was so alarmed by such a prospect, especially in light of the perceived threat from the victorious Soviet Union, that it moved to contain communism wherever it should appear. For France, the Cold War actually commenced in the summer of 1944 when Charles de Gaulle's Free French moved to head off French communists taking power in France's major cities as the defeated Germans withdrew.

At the end of the Second World War in Eastern Europe, Stalin wanted to give mother Russia even greater strategic depth. Never again would Germany be permitted to launch a surprise attack. The Red Army stayed put in its new-found allies. An iron curtain was drawn across Europe and Germany, divided as the new frontline between East and West. Stalin permitted the charade of elections, but the outcome was the same: an armed Soviet bloc was created, hostile to the capitalist Western powers. When communist leaders Tito and Hoxha took power in Yugoslavia and Albania respectively, Britain intervened to save neighbouring Greece from communism as the country slipped into civil war.

Around the rest of the world, communism and nationalism became a heady mixture, no more so than in French Indochina. The catalyst for the expansion of the Cold War beyond Europe was the triumph of communism in China. The victorious Mao Zedong saw Burma, Korea, Malaya, Tibet and Vietnam as fertile ground for the spread of communist ideology. He gambled that with the support of Stalin, the Western powers, weakened by war, would never oppose his march into Asia. As a result, France found itself involved in a much wider conflict, in a type of warfare it was ill-equipped to fight. What followed was a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. French imperial pride brought the communist world crashing down around it with far-reaching ramifications for America, China and the Soviet Union.

1. END OF EMPIRE

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu took place because of France's refusal to relinquish her vast empire. It was Vichy France's stance during the Second World War that sowed the seeds for the First Indochina War. The helpless French colonial authorities became pawns in Japan's grand strategy for Southeast Asia. This provided a fertile breeding ground for the spread of communism and nationalism.

France was liberated from Nazi Germany in August 1944 and two months later the Allies recognized Charles de Gaulle's Free French government. When Nazi Germany surrendered in May 1945, de Gaulle was at the height of his power. In Europe, triumphant French armies stretched across Germany into Austria. He was head of the French government, which, although it had not been elected and consisted only of his appointees, was recognized by the rest of the world. He had become head of state by sheer willpower and force of personality, though many found him cold and distant. De Gaulle was the undisputed leader of the French empire, to which only Indochina remained to be restored.

There followed a purge of the pro-Nazi Vichy regime, and in the elections of October 1945, there was a very sharp swing to the left. The new assembly was dominated by France's communists who profited from their impressive wartime resistance record. De Gaulle, although de facto president by virtue of having liberated Paris, thanks to General Leclerc's 2nd Armoured Division, forfeited his position by insisting that France should retain its empire.

Many of France's colonies felt the time was ripe for independence. Colonial troops had shed blood for mother France during the Tunisian campaign, in Italy, metropolitan France



French troops attacking Saigon, 1859.

and Germany. This was especially the case with France's tough Algerian and Moroccan divisions. In light of the post-war situation and strained military resources, the French government needed a large defence budget, but the communist politicians opposed this.

De Gaulle was forced to resign in January 1946. He hoped this would spark a political crisis and the government would be forced to recall him. A rumour spread through Paris that de Gaulle had summoned General Leclerc from Indochina to lead a *coup d'état*. Instead, France survived his departure.

That year the Fourth Republic created the Union Française (French Union) to replace the Empire Française (French Empire). This conceived the idea of a 'Greater France', represented by an Assembly of the Union. Thanks to left-wing opposition to empire, this seemed to suggest a much more liberal policy towards France's colonial possessions. In reality, ultimate power remained with the French parliament and the temptation to retrieve lost glory was far too great even for the Fourth Republic.

During the nineteenth century, the French had carved themselves an empire in Southeast Asia and Africa. The region known collectively as French Indochina from 1893 to 1954 is now comprised of three sovereign states: Vietnam (consisting of the three kingdoms of Tonkin in the north, Annam in the centre and Cochinchina to the south), and Cambodia and Laos. The eastern provinces of Cochinchina were occupied by France in the early 1860s.

Cambodia became a protectorate in 1862 and four years later the rest of Cochinchina was taken over. After a series of military operations, Annam and Tonkin came under French rule. Indochina was completed ten years later when Laos also became a protectorate. The French Indochina Union was created in 1887.

The pre-war French power structure allowed for an Emperor of Annam, whose realm included parts of Tonkin as well as kings in Cambodia and Laos. They all ruled within the heavily French-controlled union. Indochina's component states were ethnically and culturally very different. The Vietnamese, generally similar in appearance to the Chinese, contrast with Cambodia's Khmer people who are much darker, having different features and quite distinct cultural and religious origins. Equally distinct are the mountain peoples of Laos. Notably, the Cambodians and Vietnamese were traditional enemies, which helped ensure French dominance.

French military expeditions also ensured control of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. In sub-Saharan Africa, France ruled the vast French West Africa federation, which had existed since 1895, encompassing eight French colonial territories. These were French Guinea, French Sudan, Dahomey (Benin), Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). The federation was ruled from Dakar, remaining firmly under the control of Vichy during the Second World War. France's other African colonies included the equally large French Equatorial Africa, which encompassed Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville) and Gabon. This had been established in 1910 and was controlled from Brazzaville.

The French Foreign Legion was in the forefront of carving out this empire. It also acted as the glue that bound it together. Particularly in North Africa and the Levant, the Legion built their blockhouses and forts, becoming the symbol of France's overseas military power. As well as taking a lead in empire building, the Legion was instrumental in crushing insurrection. Its success was to entrench military thinking when it came to the handling of France's colonies.



French governor-general's palace in Saigon, 1875.

After the fall of France in 1940, the prostrate country was divided into two. The southern, unoccupied 'Free Zone' was administered by a government based in Vichy. The armistice of 25 June 1940 permitted Vichy a metropolitan defence force of just 100,000 for maintaining public order. This regime, however, did not resist the German invasion on 11 November 1942. General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny wanted to fight and was imprisoned by Vichy for his defiance.

Following the armistice, the French colonial authorities found themselves in an extraordinary situation. Their first loyalty was to Vichy as the recognized government of unoccupied France, not some unknown general who had proclaimed himself leader of the Free French from the sanctuary of London. Yet Charles de Gaulle had raised a banner for all those who secretly felt that the armistice was humiliating. France should have gone down fighting and stayed in a state of war, even if all of metropolitan France had been occupied. Vichy offered nothing but a shaming compromise and smacked of collaboration with the enemy.

The Germans were lenient with France's colonial empire, especially after Dakar repulsed de Gaulle's Free French Forces in September 1940. This showed that France's colonial troops were loyal to Vichy and therefore compliant. North Africa was firmly in Vichy's hands under the supervision of the German and Italian Armistice Commission. Only French Equatorial Africa rallied to the Free French. In Syria, Lebanon and Madagascar, the Vichy garrisons resisted the Allies in 1941. The following year they resisted them in North Africa.

In his youth, de Gaulle was sceptical of the value of the French empire. While on a military course in 1938, he infuriated another student, who had just returned from Indochina, after launching into a lengthy solution for the Far Eastern problem when he had never



French marines in Indochina, 1888.

even been there. Two years later, Equatorial Africa changed de Gaulle's attitude forever. The recruitment of Brazzaville to his fledgling cause was welcome consolation in light of his failure before Dakar. It gave the Free French an independent base, a radio station and some 16,500 men.

The first thing de Gaulle did was to set up the Council for the Defence of the Empire and hold the Conference of Colonial Governors. In expressing his gratitude for the loyalty of his colonial supporters, he inadvertently overstepped the mark by saying:

In French Africa, as in all other territories where men live under our flag, there will be no progress unless the inhabitants benefit materially and morally in the countries of their birth, unless they can raise themselves little by little to the level where they are capable of taking part in the management of their own affairs in their homelands.

Whilst de Gaulle pledged to preserve French sovereignty wherever it existed, he also offered a move toward self-government, rather than adhering to the traditional concept of integrating French overseas territories with metropolitan France. The cynical might argue that he was simply being pragmatic in the face of rising nationalism in the old empires and America's dominant anti-colonial influence. No doubt de Gaulle hoped his speech might sway the vast bulk of the French empire still loyal to Vichy. In his memoirs, de Gaulle wrote, 'We were giving France back Independence, the Empire, and the Sword.'

In distant Indochina, the French garrison came under pressure from Japan and Thailand. The French governor-general, General Georges Catroux, found himself in an impossible position. On 19 June 1940, the Japanese insisted that he close the border with China, the British would not help, and Vichy instructed that he should comply with all Tokyo's demands. Catroux disapproved of the armistice with Germany and was sympathetic to the Free French. Henri Lémery, Vichy's minister of the colonies, immediately dismissed Catroux. He did not return to France but instead sought out de Gaulle.

Japan, seeking to stop the flow of arms to China and after threatening to invade Indochina, was permitted to station troops in Hanoi and Haiphong. Anyone showing support for de Gaulle's cause was punished by the Vichy authorities. Many were arrested, and even senior officials and demonstrators were fired on.

De Gaulle could do nothing about the pleas for help from Indochina. It was too far away and he simply did not have the resources. Vichy France was intent on doing nothing that would antagonize the Japanese or their German allies. The colony was on its own. Catroux, whom British Prime Minister Winston Churchill vainly hoped might replace de Gaulle, made it clear that Indochina was totally supportive of the Free French cause. De Gaulle recalled, 'At that time, for me Indochina was like a great disabled ship that I could help only after a long process of gathering the rescue apparatus. Seeing her moving farther away in the mists, I swore to myself that one day I should bring her back.'

Meanwhile, Thailand swiftly sought to capitalize on France's defeat and Indochina's disarray by claiming former territories in Cambodia and Laos. This led to a brief border war in October 1940, which, three months later, saw the Thais conduct a full-scale invasion. Although Japan sided with Thailand over territorial concessions, it continued to court Vichy. In December 1941, Japanese troops passed through Indochina with the acquiescence of Vichy in order to attack first Thailand and then British Burma, Malaya and Singapore.

After the Allied invasion of French North Africa, by 1943 every French overseas possession, with the exception of Indochina, which was under Japanese domination, had declared its allegiance to de Gaulle. This made him the virtual ruler of all Frenchmen outside occupied metropolitan France.

The Japanese tolerated Vichy's continued civil administration of Indochina in return for substantial basing and airfield rights until early March 1945. By this stage, Vichy had collapsed and had been replaced by a hostile de Gaulle. The Japanese seized complete control, by either capturing the small French garrison or by driving it into China.



French troops fleeing over the Chinese border after the Japanese took Indochina in early 1945.

The Emperor of Annam, Bao Dai, was permitted to declare Vietnam's independence. Prince Norodom Sihanouk did likewise in Cambodia, as did Laos. In a stroke, French Indochina vanished. De Gaulle was not happy that the one colonial possession he had pledged to restore had suddenly slipped from his grasp, thanks to Japanese duplicity.

In reality, Bao Dai ruled little more than Hanoi. North of the city, the communist-controlled League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, had created a sizeable liberated area. Their leader, Ho Chi Minh, also had supporters in central and southern Vietnam. They not only resisted the Japanese but also removed those seen to be collaborating with the French colonial administration. Although a communist, Ho was seen as a moderate influence, holding in check the more militant leaders such as Vo Nguyen Giap – soon to be known as General Giap, the master of guerrilla warfare – who advocated violence to achieve their goals.

The Viet Minh gained favour with America, that staunch opponent of colonialism, by intelligence gathering. In return, the Americans supplied them with weapons with which to fight the Japanese. The collapse of Japan's war effort in August 1945 presented Ho Chi Minh and his supporters a golden opportunity to finally free themselves of France.

In Paris, de Gaulle had a major problem on his hands with America. President Roosevelt made no secret of his dislike for the man, who he saw as being undemocratic. He also considered France a citadel of colonialism. Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal all



Following the liberation of France Charles de Gaulle was determined to reclaim Indochina.

had overseas empires, but in Roosevelt's eyes, France's was by far the worst. He was only too aware of how France and Spain had treated Moroccan independence aspirations in the 1920s: they had launched a series of bloody military campaigns.

Roosevelt's son, Elliot, who travelled to Casablanca with his father in January 1943, recalled the president was not convinced it would be right to restore the French empire 'at all ever, without first obtaining in the case of each individual colony some sort of pledge, some sort of statement of just exactly what was planned in terms of each colony's administration ... How do they belong to France?'

In the case of Indochina, Roosevelt said the locals considered anything was better than a return to France. He was never keen on France reassuming control of Indochina, writing, 'France has milked Indochina for a hundred years. The people of Indochina deserve better than that.'

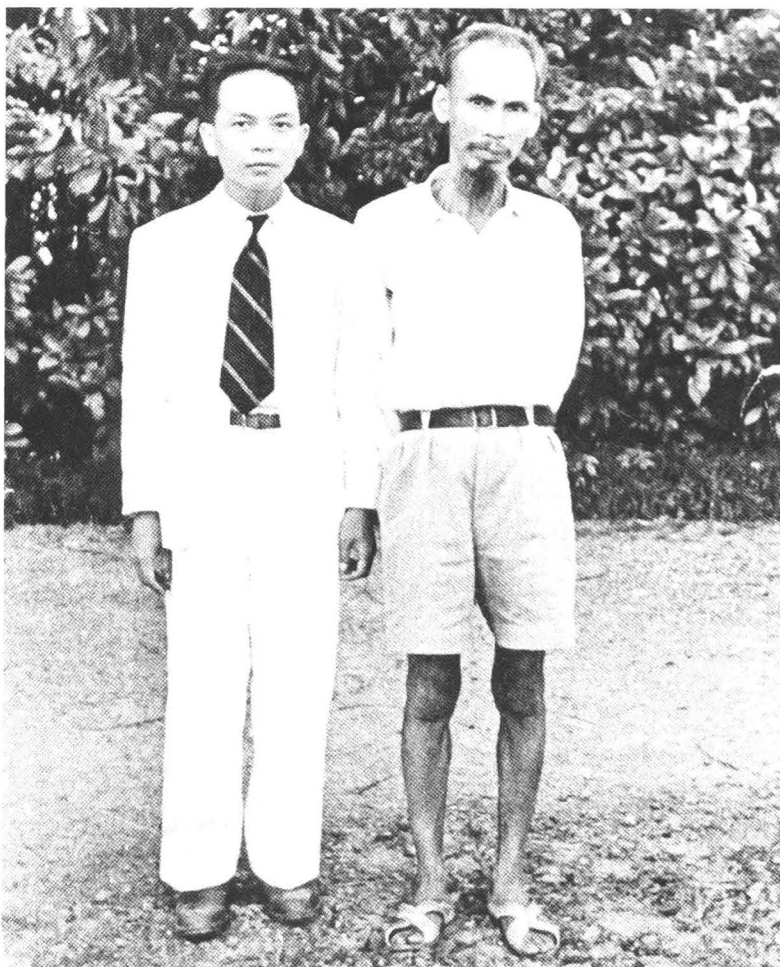
The fact that the Philippines had been under American protection since 1902 was an entirely different matter. When Roosevelt died in April 1945, his successor Harry S. Truman was no more sympathetic.

2. COLD WAR REALITIES

France saw the opening stages of the Cold War as early as 1944 when Charles de Gaulle's Free French Forces moved to block French communists from seizing power in Paris, Marseilles and Toulon. He had not wanted them forming a rival government that would challenge his power base. At the end of the war, the Red Army remained in Eastern Europe, occupying Hitler's war gains. As a result, all Eastern Europe ended up with communist governments.

In Greece, following liberation, Britain was forced to act against a communist takeover. Beyond Europe, by 1949 the Chinese Civil War had ended, with Mao's communists in power. This encouraged fledgling communist movements in Indochina, Burma, Malaya and Korea.

Unfortunately, in the post-war period, France proved more unstable than any of the defeated powers. The effect of France's devastating collapse and subjugation in 1940 was long lasting and could not easily be remedied. The war gave rise to a strong left-wing revival, thanks to the resistance, local liberation committees and militant unions.



Vietnamese communist leaders Vo Nguyen Giap (left) and Ho Chi Minh, early 1940s.

Regrettably for France, the right wing was discredited and was unable to govern without being tainted by the past. This was unlike West Germany, or Italy, where there emerged a new and strong Christian Democratic Party.

The weak French Third Republic had been swept away, and in 1946 the Fourth Republic began but without de Gaulle. While America was relieved that he had gone, the last thing it wanted was to see France in the grasp of the communists who were aligning themselves with Stalin. At first, a coalition government between radical, socialist and communist parties was attempted, but this quickly collapsed in disarray in 1947.

After the resignation of de Gaulle, drafting a new constitution proved far from easy. After two referendums, it was finally accepted, but turned out to be very much like that of the Third Republic. It suffered the same defects and was very unpopular. It was voted in by 9.1 million to 7.9 million, but with 7.9 million abstentions. The French despaired at all the infighting, and longed for a strong government that could steer France onto the road to recovery and her rightful place in the world.

The country now experienced a swing back to the right. De Gaulle formed the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français* (Rally of the French People) to gather the right to the new Popular Front government. The party performed well in the local elections. An energized de Gaulle toured the country, making rousing speeches. On 15 July 1947, he told a crowd of 60,000 at Rennes that the war in Indochina and the rising nationalism throughout the French Empire was the fault of both the communists and a regime too weak to control them.

The subsequent elections of November 1948 confirmed France's swing away from communism. The communists were excluded from the government, which fought off repeated left-wing challenges.

Elsewhere in Europe, the Soviet Union's belligerent blockade of West Berlin during 1948–49 heralded the long Cold War between the Western Allies and the Soviet-influenced states to the east. While America had no desire to help Britain and France recover their empires, it had no intention either of tolerating the spread of communism. From Washington's perspective, there was no democratic peace dividend at the end of the Second World War. In Eastern Europe, communist governments had been voted in thanks to overbearing support from Moscow. In the Balkans, both Albania and Yugoslavia had been taken over by their communist resistance movements, while Greece had only just been saved following a protracted civil war.

By far the most momentous and newsworthy event in Asia was Britain relinquishing control of India in 1947. It signalled to the world that European imperialism was no longer sustainable on such an enormous scale. While the Indian communist party had on occasions been a nuisance, it was never a major player within the independence movement. Together with other political organizations, it had been subject to intense scrutiny by Britain's secretive Indian Political Intelligence organization. Surveillance was also maintained on British communists who supported Indian nationalism.

During the Second World War, although the Indian communist party was implacably opposed to British rule, it wanted to do nothing that would aid the Axis powers. Afterwards, in February 1946, when part of the Indian navy mutinied in Bombay, the regional communist party called a general strike. As a result, violence flared, leaving over 200 dead. Fortunately for the British, Mohandas Gandhi had no interest in

communist ideology or its predilection for violence. 'India does not want communism,' he said with heartfelt conviction. Although India was never under threat from communism, just three months after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Mao swallowed Tibet without much fuss. Resistance by the Tibetans was short-lived and the Indian Army did nothing to help.

It was Stalin's Red Army that crushed Japan's forces in Manchuria and Korea at the end of the Second World War, not Mao Zedong's communist People's Liberation Army. When the Chinese Civil War was renewed, Mao continued to promote communism beyond his country's frontiers. There was a communist rising in newly independent Burma in 1948, which continued to be a threat until the fall of their stronghold at Prome two years later.

The presence of Chinese nationalist troops in northern Burma also caused the country problems. Chen Ping in Malaya, the communist leader there, after visiting Mao, employed his revolutionary methods of guerrilla warfare. The violence there also began in 1948, continuing for many years until the British and her Commonwealth allies prevailed against a weakened, predominantly Chinese insurgency.

In the case of Burma, the communists were split into two factions, known as the 'Red Flags' and the 'White Flags' that had differing goals. On Independence Day on 4 January 1948, the former was already in open revolt, while the latter followed suit two months later. Their area of control was steadily expanded from the Irrawaddy Delta all the way to Mandalay. To complicate matters, part of the Burmese army revolted, as did the country's Karen people in the southeast, who lived along Burma's frontiers with China and Thailand. In the face of Mao's growing victories, Chinese nationalists, some 12,000 strong, moved into part of Burma's Shan state on the eastern frontier. They were supplied by America and Nationalist Taiwan, in the hope that one day they would return to fight communist China. During 1950 and 1951, the Burmese launched a series of operations against the communists and Karen, greatly reducing their areas of control.

In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh (born Nguyen Tat Than, then called Nguyen Ai Hoc) had been a communist agent since 1925. While studying in France, he had become a member of the French Communist Party, before returning to Indochina in 1930 as a representative of the Comintern (*Kommunisticheskii Internatsional* – Communist International). His army, the Viet Minh, formed in 1941, had received training in guerrilla warfare in Yen-an from Mao. By 1949, the French had been forced to recognize Vietnam as a political entity, but refused to accept Ho as ruler. Mao recognized him the following year. De Gaulle felt that it was absurd to negotiate with Ho Chi Minh and that it was vital to hold onto Indochina. France needed to send out a strong message that it would protect its colonies even when they were as far away as Indochina.

Mao's triumph in China in 1949 meant it was inevitable that he would throw even greater resources into supporting communist movements in neighbouring Indochina and Korea. The division of the latter at the end of the Second World War, between the communist North and the supposedly democratic South, was a highly dangerous flashpoint. When North Korea invaded the South, the Americans and British, under the auspices of the United Nations, stepped in and found themselves dragged into a three-year conventional war.

In late 1949, the victorious Mao had visited Stalin in Moscow before they signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. Mao returned home, confident that China was now a full member of the international communist brotherhood.



Chinese troops captured in Korea.

He was to gain the full cooperation of one of the world's superpowers for the next thirty years. In reality, Stalin distrusted the long-term goals of communist China as it posed a potential threat to the Soviet Far East. All the time that China had been weakened by unrelenting civil war and Japanese aggression, she had not been of any great concern.

As well as tying China to the Soviet Union, Stalin needed the cooperation of the Chinese for the expansion of communism in the region. This would ensure that Mao was preoccupied and would be prevented from meddling in Soviet affairs. Mao had intended to demobilize part of the People's Liberation Army, but he was soon to find he had need of its services again.

In March 1949, Korean communist leader Kim Il Sung had suggested to Stalin in Moscow that Korea should be forcibly reunified. At the time, Stalin was still fully occupied with the Berlin crisis, so the situation was not yet ripe for a war in Korea that could antagonize the Western powers further. Kim renewed his request a year later. This time, Stalin relented, promising military aid for the Korean People's Army. Stalin, though, had insisted that Kim get Mao's approval as they were about to start a major war on China's very doorstep.

Stalin's developing Cold War goals were self-evident: the subordination of Mao's aims to a dominant Soviet foreign policy, the integration of a war in Korea into his East Asia strategy, support for Ho Chi Minh's communists in Indochina, and the infiltration of the

communist party in Japan. This policy of deliberately creating flashpoints was designed to force America to stretch her defence commitments at a time when she was demobilizing. This inevitably would force Washington to reduce its support for the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Europe. Stalin would deliberately extend the Cold War from the escalating standoff in Europe, to one of global confrontation that included Korea and Indochina.

The British Joint Intelligence Committee, in fact, assessed that the Korean War was not part of the Cold War in Europe, saying:

We believe North Korean aggression was originally launched not with the primary objective of diverting American attention from Europe, or as a prelude to provocative action against our weak spots on the European or Middle East periphery, but as a limited operation within the gambit of an intensified drive to expel Western influence from the whole of the Far East and South-East Asia.

America played right into Stalin's hands when it announced that the U.S. Pacific defence perimeter ran from the Philippines to Okinawa and then back through Japan, but crucially excluding Korea. In January 1950, the Americans confirmed the exclusion of Korea and Taiwan. This gave Stalin almost a free hand to help Kim Il Sung.

While Soviet troops would not be directly involved in the invasion of South Korea, Stalin promised that Mao would release 14,000 battle-hardened Korean soldiers who had served with the People's Liberation Army. In total, around 100,000 Koreans had fought alongside Mao's forces in China. Stalin also promised advisers and weapons, in particular tanks, which was something the South did not have. The plan was to occupy South Korea in a two-week operation.

Stalin and Mao, however, made a strategic miscalculation, for they took the Americans at their word that they would not defend South Korea. However, with American bases in nearby Japan, it was relatively easy to feed troops into Korea. The two communist leaders would have been better off toppling the weak French hold on Indochina. The French military did not have the resources to fight a war across Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Should the Americans have decided to intervene to assist the French, their nearest bases were much further away in the Philippines.

Mao's commitment to the Korean War, including vast numbers of Chinese troops, was a fortunate development for Paris. It meant that Chinese support for the nationalists in Indochina would diminish, plus the international community would be distracted whilst it supported United Nations forces committed to the defence of South Korea. For Ho Chi Minh, it represented a significant setback. Despite the enormous burden of the war in Indochina, the French sent an infantry battalion to South Korea, which landed at Pusan on 29 November 1950. It was to remain for the next three years until redeployed to Indochina.

3. OPERATION MASTERDOM

At the end of the Second World War, and despite everything going on in Paris and across the rest of the country, Charles de Gaulle never forgot about Indochina. Nor did he forget his pledge to reclaim it for France. Thanks to the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945, it would be an incredibly difficult task. Nonetheless, he had just the man for the job: Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque, who was one of his most trusted Gaullist generals.

To protect his family while serving with the Free French, the Vicomte de Hauteclocque assumed the name Jacques Leclerc. He became a national hero. In November 1945, Leclerc was formally added to his family's name. During the closing months of the Second World War, General Leclerc's 2nd Armoured Division had helped with General de Lattre's destruction of the Colmar pocket, before making a dramatic dash to Hitler's mountain lair at Berchtesgaden. Afterwards, Leclerc led his division as the vanguard of the victory parade in Paris. Not one to be idle, he requested that de Gaulle send him to Morocco.

Instead, de Gaulle informed Leclerc that he proposed to redesignate the wartime French III Corps to become the headquarters for an expeditionary force destined for Indochina. This would be created using the 3rd and 9th colonial infantry divisions. Leclerc would be commander-in-chief of this force, answering to Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, the newly appointed High Commissioner for Indochina.

De Gaulle told d'Argenlieu that his incredibly complex mission was to recover Indochina from the British, Chinese, Japanese and the Viet Minh, and to re-establish French sovereignty in the region. D'Argenlieu and Leclerc were to make no concessions to the Vietnamese nationalists. All they were to offer, once firmly in control, was limited internal autonomy to each of the states of Indochina within a French Union. Leclerc would be in charge of all foreign affairs, defence policy and internal politics.

While de Gaulle and his supporters were determined that Indochina should be returned to French authority, Ho Chi Minh aspired to full independence for his country. Ho and his supporters saw the impending post-war vacuum as their best chance to attain this. However, before he could even contend with the French, Ho was to find himself caught between the British and the Nationalist Chinese.

During the Potsdam Conference, at which the French were not represented, it was agreed that Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese would accept the Japanese surrender in northern Indochina, while the British would accept it in the south. The 16th Parallel was to form the dividing line. The defeated Japanese had two armies in Indochina and Thailand. British intelligence assessed them to number about 70,000, but this was actually too high. About 28,500 men of the Japanese Thirty-eighth Army were deployed in northern Indochina and Thailand. The Japanese Army of the South in southern Indochina, under Lieutenant General Yuitsu Tsuchihashi, numbered about 30,000, including air force and naval personnel.

De Gaulle knew that Washington, with its anti-colonial policies, was behind this deliberate snub, which immediately served to undermine French colonial authority in the region. In practical terms, though, the French were not in a position to accept the Japanese surrender. They did not have the resources to swiftly send large numbers of troops to

Indochina to disarm the Japanese army. Leclerc's men would not reach Indochina until October/November 1945. In contrast, the British and Chinese were much closer to hand.

Such niceties mattered little to the Japanese, who simply wanted to be repatriated as soon as possible. In the north, perhaps in the name of mischief-making, they were more inclined to hand authority over to Ho Chi Minh, and many of their weapons were passed to his Viet Minh guerrillas. Anything that inconvenienced the Chinese was seen as a good thing. Ho certainly had no love for the Chinese nationalists as they had imprisoned him in 1942 and established the Vietnam Revolutionary League (Dong Minh Hoi) as an anti-communist counter to his party. He was only released after he convinced them he was a nationalist first and a communist second, and that they had a common enemy in the Japanese.

At the end of the war, it was not long before a large Chinese army of 'liberation', numbering some 150,000 under General Lu Han, pillaged its way over the border. It was formed of units whose loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek was suspect, so he was probably glad to have them out of the way and preoccupied. Certainly, Lu Han's ultimate sympathies lay with Mao. He was to defect in 1949. It was not long before these Chinese troops had alienated the Vietnamese, French and Japanese in Tonkin and north Annam.

France's initial attempt to reassert sovereignty lacked power, having the air of a comic opera. In late August 1945, two teams, led by colonels who were to act as the administrators for the north and the south, were parachuted in. To the north, Colonel Messmer was immediately arrested by the Viet Minh and forced to flee to China. Colonel Cédile, sent to the south, was ignored by the Viet Min and was left at liberty to liaise with the local French authorities.



The French navy's first aircraft in Indochina were American-supplied Catalinas in late October 1945.

Ho Chi Minh moved from his stronghold into Hanoi, hoping to pre-empt the Chinese as much as the French. On 2 September 1945, he declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Emperor Bao Dai, after abdicating, became chief counsellor to the new government. The communist-dominated Provisional Executive Committee of South Vietnam, led by Tran Van Giau in Saigon, acknowledged the authority of Ho's northern government. Ho, however, was in a very weak position and had to agree with General Lu to dissolve the Vietnamese Communist Party and hold elections to create a broad coalition government.

In France, after his appointment, Leclerc recruited some of his former officers from the 2nd Armoured Division, including his intelligence chief, Colonel Paul Repiton-Préneuf. He also quickly set about familiarizing himself with the region and its culture. Aware that the dark-skinned Cambodians were the mortal foes of the Vietnamese, he forbade the deployment of his colonial divisions' West African units to Indochina. This instruction was not strictly adhered to, nor did it deter the deployment of Algerian and Moroccan troops. During September 1945, en route to Indochina, Leclerc stopped off in Ceylon to consult Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia. He also spent time in India, Malaya, Japan and Singapore where he held briefings.

Mountbatten, facing his own problems, warned Leclerc in no uncertain terms that post-war Asia was now a completely different place to pre-war Asia. Both were fully aware that the major colonial powers had been humiliated in the region, and that this was something from which the nationalists had taken heart. Mountbatten said there could be no going back, to which Leclerc responded pragmatically, 'What you say makes sense but is not French policy.'

He then represented France during the Japanese surrender on board an American battleship in Tokyo Bay, and again at the Japanese surrender in Singapore.

Mountbatten had discussed British plans, known as Operation Masterdom, to deal with southern Indochina. This envisaged the movement by air to Saigon, via Bangkok, of the 80th Infantry Brigade, part of Major General Douglas Gracey's 20th Indian Division, plus elements of two RAF squadrons and an Allied Control Commission. The latter was to assist Allied prisoners of war and oversee the repatriation of the Japanese. They would be followed by the rest of Gracey's division, comprising the 32nd and 100th brigades, which would be shipped by sea. In total, almost 26,000 men and 2,400 vehicles were to be deployed to Saigon to maintain law and order. Once in place, Gracey was to wait until the French were in a position to reassert themselves. His task was simply to take control of the large Japanese garrison, which was to be achieved with the cooperation of Tsuchihashi.

The British began arriving in Saigon on 12 September 1945, with a force consisting of Indian Army as well as British units under General Gracey. The 80th Brigade first flew to Bangkok from Burma, and then on to Saigon. It had been almost four weeks since the Japanese emperor announced his country would accept the terms of the Potsdam declaration, and over a week since the Japanese surrendered to MacArthur. In that time, law and order in Indochina had broken down in many areas, and Viet Minh nationalists had seized power in Saigon. Ironically, the Japanese army, once an occupying force, now found itself acting as policeman.

Colonel Cédile and his supporters quickly persuaded Gracey to rearm the local French colonial infantry regiments, which had been held by the Japanese. Much to Mountbatten's displeasure, on 21 September, Gracey declared martial law throughout Indochina south of the 16th Parallel. Two days later, he agreed to the takeover of the government by Cédile.



British-supplied Spitfires were deployed to Indochina by the French air force.

Although Mountbatten felt that Gracey had overstepped his remit, London supported his actions. This was, after all, a French problem.

Also on 23 September, a mixed force of French Gaullists, former Vichy troops and armed French colonists, stormed the Viet Minh headquarters in the Saigon town hall, where they arrested members of the Provisional Executive Committee. The Tricolore was hoisted, but most of the committee members escaped. The Viet Minh now knew that a smooth political transition of power was not going to happen.

Gracey quietly ejected the Viet Min from the city and handed it over to the French. However, when the French 5th Colonial Infantry Regiment attempted to remove the last of the Viet Minh guards, they resisted, resulting in two French soldiers being killed. This sparked a riot on the night of 24–25 September, during which a mob ran amok, slaughtering French civilians. The following day, the Viet Minh set fire to the central market and attacked Tan Son Nhut airfield. Repelling this assault, the British lost a soldier, but killed half a dozen Viet Minh.

Gracey now had a war on his hands, which was something Mountbatten had hoped to avoid. Nonetheless, their troops were hardened Burma veterans and highly experienced in fighting both jungle and irregular warfare. They were more than capable of facing down the ill-trained and ill-equipped Viet Minh. In early October, Gracey secured a cease-fire. At that point, Leclerc arrived in Saigon. Hostilities resumed on the 10th, when the Viet Minh set about a British engineering party near Tan Son Nhut, killing or wounding most of them. Once Brigadier Woodford's 32nd Brigade landed as welcome reinforcements, they were sent into Saigon's troublesome northern suburbs.

Operation Masterdom

When the Viet Minh attacked Tan Son Nhut again, they were once more repelled by Indian and Japanese soldiers. By mid-October, British forces had killed over 300 Viet Minh, while the rearmed Japanese accounted for another 225. Nevertheless, the Viet Minh stepped up their attacks across Saigon and attempted to lay siege to it. In response, at the end of the month Gracey launched an operation to drive the Viet Minh away from the city. Conducted by 'Gateforce' this included a full battalion of Japanese infantry who had little love for the Vietnamese. The latter killed fifty Viet Minh east of Saigon. When the mission was complete, almost 200 insurgents had been eliminated by the British task force. Ironically, the Japanese did not formally surrender to Lord Mountbatten in Saigon until 30 November 1945.

Trouble was brewing elsewhere in Indochina. The Japanese had imposed a prime minister, Son Ngoc Thanh, on the pro-French Cambodian king. The former had broken all ties with France and sought to oust the monarchy. This made Cambodia highly vulnerable to the Viet Minh's Cambodian communist allies. Leclerc quickly flew to Phnom Penh from where he ordered Thanh to attend the British military representative. When he did, the French arrested him and flew him to France.

Having stabilized the situation in neighbouring Cambodia, Leclerc then turned his attentions to the countryside of Cochinchina and southern Vietnam beyond the confines of Saigon. Once the insurgents' stranglehold on the city had been broken, Leclerc's columns fanned out. The Viet Minh and other nationalist groups were poorly armed. They could not match French firepower, so they set about blowing up roads and bridges. Ambushes and snipers also served to hamper the French patrols.



French forces arrived in Indochina with British weapons, including the Bren gun.
(Photo Bundesarchiv)

Leclerc relied on speed and surprise as much as firepower. He moved his men up the roads and waterways, often in the dark, to suddenly materialize in the towns and villages of Cochinchina. Infantry sweeps, backed by artillery and aircraft, then ousted the stubborn resistance. Leclerc also conducted a hearts-and-minds campaign by ordering his men to treat the locals with respect. There was to be no breakdown of military discipline with brutality or looting. Leclerc knew that this had to be enforced because many of his reinforcements were former French resistance fighters who were used to doing things their own way.

To the relief of French colonists and plantation owners, much of the region was successfully reoccupied and a network of military outposts established by the end of November 1945. Units were also sent into Cambodia and southern Laos to reassert French authority. Regaining northern Laos was more difficult because of the presence of the antagonistic Chinese, but a small contingent was deployed against local guerrillas. By this point, High Commissioner d'Argenlieu had arrived to take charge of Leclerc.

Gracey happily handed over Saigon's northern suburbs to General Valluy's 9th Colonial Infantry Division in early December. The British 32nd Brigade was then redeployed to Borneo. The last major engagement involving the British occurred on 3 January 1946, when 900 Viet Minh attacked Bien Hoa. The defenders fought throughout the night without losing a single British or Indian soldier, whereas the attackers suffered 100 dead.

That month, French troops, landing from the sea, entered south Amman to take control. Also at the close of January 1946, the British 80th Brigade relinquished its area of responsibility to the French and the 100th Brigade was withdrawn to Saigon. Gracey handed back southern Vietnam to Leclerc, and by the end of March, Britain had all but ended its seven-month operation. A few troops remained to guard the Allied Control Mission, which was wound up in mid-May. An estimated 2,700 Viet Minh were killed during Operation Masterdom. British fatalities amounted to 40 men. In pacifying Cochinchina, Leclerc lost around 630 dead and 1,000 wounded from a force of 50,000 men.

Although French colonial authority had been successfully restored in the four regions south of the dividing 16th Parallel, the Viet Minh were far from defeated. Leclerc and d'Argenlieu hoped that everyday life could now be resumed, but they underestimated the growing strength of the Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh's determination to be rid of the French. The initial fighting had just been a taste of things to come.

4. RISE OF THE VIET MINH

It was the year after the defeat of France by Nazi Germany that nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, or League for the Independence of Vietnam. This was soon shortened to Viet Minh. His military commander, Vo Nguyen Giap, began seizing territory in Tonkin. Four years later, following the collapse of the Japanese in August 1945, the Viet Minh and the much less communist-dominated United Party of Cochinchina were able to fill the political vacuum.

Both Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap were advocates of Mao Zedong's theory of revolutionary war. Mao, drawing on the fighting in the vastness of China, reasoned that the revolutionary, to buy time to mobilize the political will of the people, should trade space. The struggle for ultimate political supremacy would take place through three stages. These consisted of the 'safe-base-areas' preparation phase, a guerrilla-warfare stage to weaken the enemy, and an open-warfare stage when the guerrillas were ready to fight a conventional war. In the case of Indochina, all three were to take place at the same time.

Foremost, the Viet Minh was a revolutionary movement whose goal was the seizure of political power rather than fighting a conventional conflict. Therefore, although Giap organized his forces on traditional lines with battalions, regiments and divisions, the chain of command was firmly in the hands of the political officers. This very much mirrored the control of the Soviet Red Army during the Second World War and the communist Chinese People's Liberation Army during the Second World War, Chinese Civil War and Korean War.



Vo Nguyen Giap with Viet Minh fighters, 1944.

Direction of the people's revolution rested with Ho and his government in exile operating in the mountains of Viet Bac. From there he sought to control every aspect of the conflict. From 1946–47, Indochina was divided up into fourteen Minh regions under the direction of a committee that answered directly to Ho Chi Minh. As the war escalated, these administrative zones were simplified to the three kingdoms that became Vietnam.

By 1948, there were just six inter-zones encompassing northwest Tonkin, northeast Tonkin (the division between the two rested on the Red or Hong River), the Red River Delta, north Amman, south Amman (the demarcation line was the city of Hue), and Cochinchina. Each had a controlling committee responsible to the leadership in Viet Bac. Their main task was to raise and train guerrilla forces. Ho called for a general mobilization of all males and females from 18 to 45 in November 1949.

The most basic Viet Minh unit was the very simple village militia. Made up of farmers, their task was to act as labourers carrying supplies, preparing defences and intelligence gathering. It has been estimated that, by 1954, the Viet Minh could call on over 350,000 militia. They formed a cadre of recruits who could also serve with the regional troops, effectively home guard, commanded by the inter-zone committees. They were responsible for protecting their local zone as well as conducting attacks on isolated local French garrisons.

By 1954, these regional troops totalled around 75,000 across the six inter-zones. They, like the militia, were ill-equipped and did not wear uniforms. This meant that they looked like the classic peasant guerrilla. Their main contribution to Giap's war effort was that



Léo Figuères of the French Communist Party and Ho Chi Minh meet in Vietnam, May 1950. (Photo Stratigraphy)



The Viet Minh comprised village militia, regional troops and Chu Luc or regulars.

they helped tie down French forces the length and breadth of Vietnam. This effectively forced the French to adopt their strongpoint policy in trying to hold and defend territory.

The third element was the Chu Luc, or Viet Minh regular force – also known as the Vietnamese People's Army. This was a conventional army organized to defeat the weakened French military in the open-battle phase of the revolution. The Chu Luc was formed around Ho Chi Minh's original resistance fighters, and were armed with Japanese, Chinese and captured French weapons. Their uniform consisted of black 'pyjamas' and cork, sun helmets, later popularized by the Viet Cong.

In 1950, the status of these units was formalized when sixty battalions were reorganized into five regular infantry divisions. These consisted of the 304th, 308th, 312th and the 316th in the Viet Bac base region, and the 320th in the South Delta base (Red River Delta). They were organized on conventional lines, each with three infantry regiments (of two or three battalions), supported by anti-aircraft guns and heavy mortars. At the end of the year, a sixth 'heavy' division was created, known as the 351st. This consisted of three regiments, with artillery and anti-aircraft guns, and one of engineers. This effectively was a firepower support division.

By 1954, the Chu Luc was over 125,000 strong, with the new 325th Infantry Division in the process of being formed in An Khe province. Although Giap had no naval or air force units, he did get assistance from the Chinese. In particular, there are reports of Chinese officers serving with the Chu Luc divisions and Chinese anti-aircraft units serving alongside the Chu Luc at Dien Bien Phu.

The Viet Minh were completely reliant on Communist China for logistical backing. Ho Chi Minh naturally looked to Mao for ideological and materiel support. He spoke fluent Chinese, having lived in China for over a decade. By the late 1940s, Mao was training Vietnamese fighters. His initial aim had been to send Chinese troops to assist Ho once he

had secured the border with Indochina. Stalin would not agree to this as he had bigger plans involving Korea. When Ho travelled to Moscow in early 1950 to meet with Stalin and Mao, he was told military assistance was China's responsibility.

Mao's immediate contribution to the Viet Minh was to build roads up to the border to ferry in supplies. This ensured that the French lost control of the frontier very quickly. In the summer of 1950, Mao announced that he planned to train 60–70,000 Communist Vietnamese soldiers. They probably formed the cadre of the Chu Luc's regular infantry divisions. Mao though, was soon downgrading his support by the autumn in order to concentrate on the much larger war in Korea. His troops were also sent to occupy hapless Tibet, yet another distraction from events in Indochina.

Ho must have wished Mao lavished the same assistance on Vietnam as he did North Korea. The first regular Chinese troops, designated Chinese People's Volunteers to obfuscate China's official entry into the Korean War, crossed the Yalu River in mid-October 1950. The following month, they numbered 200,000 men. By the new year, they were in the South Korean capital Seoul, when another 250,000 men were committed to the battle.

The Viet Minh, unlike their 1960s successors the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, were initially very reliant on weapons captured from the Japanese and the French. Standard Japanese army small arms included the Nambu pistol, Arisaka Type 99 rifle, Type 100 sub-machine gun, and the Type 96 and 99 light machine gun. The Viet Minh also got their hands on Japanese 81mm and 90mm mortars. They would have particularly prized the Type 92/93 heavy machine guns and the Type 98 20mm cannon, which could be used for air defence. Keeping such weapons in the field though, was dependant on adequate stocks of ammunition. This problem was partly alleviated by the generosity of Stalin's Red Army.

Although Japanese pistols were largely inferior to their Allied counterparts, their infantry rifles and mortars were as good as most Allied designs. In contrast, Japanese grenades were often ineffective due to poor fuses and explosives. The Japanese tended to neglect their weapons, so the poor, damp storage of ammunition and explosives cannot have helped the Viet Minh.

French colonial forces often had to make do with fairly ancient weaponry dating from the First World War or even older. Most of the more modern guns had been issued to the metropolitan French army. Nonetheless, the Viet Minh employed the standard French MAS-36 rifle and the MAT-49 sub-machine gun. During the Second World War, some American arms were supplied to the Viet Minh by the Office of Strategic Services for use against the Japanese. In later years, the French also transferred American weapons to Indochina that had been issued to their army by the U.S. under the Anfa Plan.

Mao supplied weapons, many of them simply passed on from the Soviet Union, including the Soviet Mosin-Nagant rifle, PPSH-41 and PPS-43 sub-machine guns and the SKS carbine. China and North Korea also made their own versions of the PPSH-41, known as the Type 50 and Type 49 respectively. The Chinese copied the SKS and Kalashnikov, but these did not appear until 1956. Chinese supplies would have included quantities of the Mauser-based Zhongzheng, or Chiang Kai-shek rifle, captured from the defeated Chinese nationalists, and the older Hanyang Type 88 rifle.

The long-term arming of the Viet Minh was never going to be a problem. In 1949, Mao was sitting on a vast arsenal of weaponry thanks to the Soviet Union and America. The Red Army, after defeating the Japanese in Manchuria in 1945, handed over vast quantities of captured weapons. The Chinese Communists were gifted 300,000 rifles, 4,800

machine guns, 1,200 artillery pieces, over 360 tanks and 2,300 trucks. Once the Chinese Communists went over to the offensive, they captured ever-increasing quantities of arms from the disintegrating Nationalist armies.

Much of the U.S. military equipment supplied to the Chinese Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, to help in the war against the Japanese, ended up being diverted. It was deliberately held back by Chiang, ready for the resumption of the civil war against Mao. There was enough equipment provided for 30 divisions, plus over 1,000 tanks. After the surrender of Japan in September 1945, American equipment flooded into Nationalist China. Washington pledged to equip another forty of Chiang's divisions. This support, however, made Chiang complacent and overconfident.

Much of this new weaponry was swiftly lost. Mao's forces captured over 140,000 American rifles during the last four months of 1948. When the nationalist armies systematically collapsed during 1946–49, Mao received a massive windfall of 2,000,000 rifles, 250,000 machine guns, 60,000 pieces of artillery, 940 tanks and armoured cars, and over 130 aircraft. Among all this, were large quantities of American guns that would be used against the French.

However, the bulk of these weapons, and the output from Mao's military factories, would soon be soaked up by the voracious appetite of the Korean War.



Amongst the heavier weapons Mao provided the Viet Minh was the American 105mm howitzer, examples of which were captured in Korea and China.

Notably, by 1950, thanks to Chinese and Soviet aid, the Viet Minh started to deploy automatic anti-aircraft guns. The first loss to such weapons occurred on 19 January 1950, when a French air force P-63 Kingcobra was shot down over Thai-nguyen. Key among these deliveries was the Soviet M1939 37mm anti-aircraft gun based on the Bofors 40mm. This was issued to the 367th Regiment serving with the 351st Division.

Up to two regiments' worth of 37mm guns were deployed at Dien Bien Phu, which ensured the French air force received a hot reception. There have been reports of an entire Chinese anti-aircraft regiment being committed to the battle, but this has never been substantiated. The Viet Minh also had 12.7mm and 14.5mm heavy machine guns acting in an anti-aircraft role.

Viet Minh logistics were surprisingly sophisticated and highly efficient, despite French efforts to cut their supply lines. Ho Chi Minh introduced conscription in 1942, and eventually all peasants were required to undertake three months' labour every year. This usually meant digging defences or acting as porters in support of operations. To keep a Viet Minh division in the field for a month required around 50,000 porters each carrying 20kg. In some areas, bicycles were supplied, which meant porters could manage 70kg on the outward journey.

By 1952, Chinese aid was pouring over the border into the Viet Bac region by rail and then by road at a rate of 3,000 tonnes a month. This was gathered at Bac Kan, then distributed to units in the field. In 1953, almost 600 Soviet trucks were available for this job. The rapid Viet Minh build-up around Dien Bien Phu was, in part, thanks to these vehicles.

Supplies were first delivered to the Chinese rail heads at Hokow (Hokou) and Nanning. The latter offered the shortest route into northeastern Tonkin, with provisions being trucked from Nanning to the border town of Chan-Nun-Kawan, and from there on to Lang Son and Cao Bang. This attracted the attention of the French air force, so some convoys took a more circuitous route heading northwest on the Nanning–Kunming road before turning south to Cao Bang. On either route, movement usually happened after dark. To the west, a narrow-gauge railway ran from Kunming to Hokow, from where supplies could be trucked to Lao Kai. This though was not up and running until 1953, so it was not as important at the Nanning supply routes.

The guerrillas' armoury included a wide variety of booby-traps intended to maim or kill. The Viet Minh, and later the Viet Cong, became masters at improvising deadly and often despicable mines and booby-traps. These were used against convoys and foot patrols. They not only employed standard French and Chinese devices, but also produced homemade ones, using a variety of containers and explosives. Mines could be detonated by direct contact with either the mine or an electrical firing device, or by hand-operated electrical firing, or by trip wire. Mines were normally placed on well-travelled roads, trails, road bridges and footbridges. Aerial bombs, grenades, mines and mortar rounds were also used, often placed in trees.

Much more primitive impaling devices were employed, triggered by trip wire or manual release. Such devices included homemade crossbows, the spiked deadfall, mace, the Malayan gate and the trapeze swing. These were usually designed to strike the victim in the chest, and the only way to avoid them was by immediately falling backwards. The guerrillas also dug primitive but effective pit traps, the most common of which was a concealed punji pit full of stakes. There were also ankle traps, spike boards and sideways-closing traps to catch the unwary. These were often contaminated with human waste or other infectious materials containing bacteria. The fear of mines and booby-traps often greatly slowed down French operations.



Ho Chi Minh standing third from the left with an American liaison team in 1945.

As the three phases of revolutionary warfare were largely interchangeable, this made it very difficult, if not impossible, for the French to seize and hold the initiative. The French tactic of taking and securing ground inevitably meant that they had to then wait and see how the Viet Minh responded. Even when they went over to the offensive, such as at Hoa Binh and Dien Bien Phu, they faced the same problem. This meant the Viet Minh held the initiative for much of the war.

The French made little effort to counter the Viet Minh's political campaign to garner popular support amongst the population. Their generals concluded wrongly that, over time, a combination of mobile operations and static defences would defeat the revolutionaries' guerrilla and conventional warfare tactics. They were to be proved wrong.

In their guerrilla operations, the Viet Minh focused on infiltration and ambush to fight the French. The latter had no answer to infiltration, as the guerrillas looked like the peasants, enabling them, as Mao put it, to move among them 'as a fish swims in the sea'. All the French could do was try and seal off areas, for example, with the outposts on the Cao Bang–Lang Son ridge and the De Lattre Line.

The Viet Minh excelled at ambushes, especially as the French insisted on moving mainly along roads and waterways. Even when the French went over to the offensive, such as in Operation Lorraine, they still stuck to the roads and rivers. All the Viet Minh had to do was stop the lead vehicles of a convoy in a steep wooded valley, before pouring fire down to destroy it.

However, when Giap tried to fully enter the conventional warfare stage in 1951, he did this far too soon, resulting, thanks to French defensive measures, in defeat at Vinh Yen, Mao Khe and Phat Diem. The tactics of sending suicide squads to try and break through also favoured the French defenders, who responded with machine guns, artillery and napalm. It would be another two years before Ho and Giap were confident enough to again fight set-piece battles.

5. GET LECLERC

Thanks to British assistance, General Leclerc, with his limited forces, managed to successfully reclaim southern Indochina for France. In early 1946, he began to plan for an amphibious operation to get his men into the port of Haiphong and then onto Hanoi. He was well aware that the position of the 30,000-strong French community in the north was precarious, as they were caught between volatile and competing parties. Beforehand, much diplomacy was required to ensure his men were not opposed.

Leclerc urged Paris that the time was ripe to promise independence for the nationalists within the French Union. He reasoned, after his military landings at Haiphong, that France would have recovered sovereignty throughout the bulk of Indochina, and only such a step would appease the nationalists. His concern was that if this did not happen, he would be confronted by a protracted guerrilla campaign that he did not have the resources to fight.

Leclerc, as military commander, did not have the best of relations with High Commissioner d'Argenlieu. The latter refused to discuss overall strategy with Leclerc, insisting that his role was purely to reassert military control and not worry about the peace settlement. During the negotiating process in early 1946, Leclerc often found himself side-lined. To make matters worse, after the resignation of his sponsor, de Gaulle, he did not get clear support or direction from Paris. D'Argenlieu, influenced by local colonial administrators and residents, was of the view that a show of force would secure outright military and political victory.

In the north, there remained the thorny issue of the Nationalist Chinese and Viet Minh. Leclerc knew that once the Chinese had agreed to leave, he would have to move swiftly to secure Hanoi. At first it appeared as if the French and Viet Minh could reach a compromise. To appease the Chinese, Ho Chi Minh's government included non-communist nationalists, and in November 1945, he even, publicly at least, dissolved the Indochinese Communist Party.

In the face of the British withdrawal from Saigon on 6 March 1946, Ho Chi Minh signed an agreement with the French administrator, Jean Sainteny. Ho agreed to allow 25,000 French and French-officered Vietnamese troops into the north's urban areas. Sainteny recognized Vietnam as both a 'free state' within the Indochinese Federation, and as part of the French Union, and Paris agreed to withdraw all troops within five years, except for those at a few bases. A referendum was to be held on the unity of Vietnam in Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina.

Leclerc felt that this was a step in the right direction, and d'Argenlieu, who was in Paris, could not interfere. Both sides, though, knew that this agreement was really just to facilitate the removal of the troublesome Chinese. Leclerc appreciated that, long-term, Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were wholly opposed to French control.

At the start of the year, Leclerc developed a three-point strategy to remove the Chinese, who were not popular with the local French or the Vietnamese. However, the Chinese nationalists had no intention of letting the communists take power in Tonkin and northern Annam. They backed local opposition to Ho Chi Minh, which had obliged him to recognize



General Leclerc, seen here with some of the men of the French 2nd Armoured Division, 1944.

Sainteny's authority. Therefore, it was vital that Paris exert diplomatic pressure on Chiang Kai-shek, as well as Leclerc's own officers on the Chinese command in Hanoi, to facilitate the withdrawal. Secondly, Leclerc wanted to build up his forces sufficiently enough so that they were a factor at the negotiating table, and thirdly, talks should be opened with Ho Chi Minh. By early 1946, the total number of French troops had risen to 65,000.

Chiang agreed to allow his army in Tonkin to be progressively relieved by French units during March 1946. In any case, he needed his troops home to redeploy against Mao's Communist guerrillas, but he used the situation to get the French to relinquish their concession in Shanghai. In Hanoi, General Salan and Sainteny negotiated with General Lu Han to accept this timetable. These talks proved problematic with the Chinese, who appeared not entirely keen to leave their new fiefdom. They would not depart until April 1946 at the earliest, which posed problems for Leclerc, whose forces were to land in Haiphong during the first week of March. This meant that he could not be sure until the very day of his landings whether the Chinese would choose to resist.

Just as he feared, on the evening of 5 March 1946, when his force entered the Haiphong River, local Chinese units opened fire. One landing ship was set ablaze and others were hit. Leclerc had no option but to respond. A thirty-minute firefight ensued, as the two sides needlessly shot at each other. The Chinese, deciding that honour had been served, sent a negotiator with the offer of a ceasefire on condition that the French withdrew downstream. Leclerc refused, and a very tense twenty-four hours followed, until the Chinese finally allowed him to disembark 5,000 troops.

The day after the landings, Giap came to see Leclerc to press his case. As fellow soldiers, both showed the other great respect, with Giap offering admiration for the French resistance and the liberation of Paris. Not long after Leclerc met with Ho Chi Minh, the communist leader was impressed with Leclerc whom he felt he could trust. Ho wanted a joint Franco-Vietnamese commission to supervise the ceasefire and administration of south Annam and Cochinchina. Leclerc refused on the latter, but agreed to scale down French operations while contact was made with remaining rebel units. He also supported Ho's call for early negotiations with Paris, which were backed by the pragmatic Sainteny.

Although the rest of Leclerc's force landed without further hitch, another week was wasted while pressure was brought to bear on Chiang Kai-shek. Eventually, the local Chinese commander agreed to coordinate his withdrawal with the French. The Tricolore was flying once more over Haiphong, but at the cost of thirty-seven dead.

Despite this apparent progress, when Leclerc entered Hanoi on 18 March 1946, only French citizens welcomed him. In some areas in Tonkin, the French were met with outright resistance, but in others, Leclerc and Salan managed to develop a friendly partnership with the local Viet Minh. Leclerc knew that with his limited resources the complete re-conquest of Tonkin was simply impossible.

Keen to avoid French involvement in purely internal Vietnamese affairs, and to foster cooperation, Leclerc was soon at loggerheads with d'Argenlieu. The High Commissioner was not prepared to make any concessions. He felt that Leclerc's meetings with Ho and Giap verged on national betrayal. D'Argenlieu was of the view that Leclerc and Salan were straying well beyond their military remit, ignoring the fact that the generals were on the political as well as military frontline when it came to dealing with the communists.

D'Argenlieu, even while still in Paris, did all he could to delay the negotiations and sought to divorce Cochinchina from the rest of Vietnam. He used his time in the French capital to strengthen his hand and garner support for his hard-line approach. He wanted Leclerc and Salan dismissed and replaced, but he could not achieve this. When he returned to



The French transport fleet consisted largely of the French-produced version of the Junker Ju 52, the Toucan.

Indochina in late March, he completely ignored both generals, and began issuing orders, bypassing the military chain of command in the process.

Leclerc was thoroughly alarmed that d'Argenlieu's actions would inevitably push Ho further into the arms of the more militant wing of the Viet Minh. In Cochinchina, the High Commissioner's proposals resulted in the Viet Minh opening a new guerrilla campaign that the stretched French forces could not contain. When d'Argenlieu finally met Ho, all he would offer was local negotiations – there was to be no high-level international recognition with talks in Paris. Giap responded by demanding full independence encompassing Cochinchina.

Despite his goal of maintaining French sovereignty, d'Argenlieu, in order to keep the Viet Minh talking, had to acquiesce to holding discussions in Paris. Due to the instability of French domestic politics, these were delayed until the summer, by which time d'Argenlieu had forged ahead with his plans by forming a government for Cochinchina. On 1 June 1946, he proclaimed Cochinchina an autonomous republic, in effect a French puppet state. Ho and Giap saw this as nothing more than a French attempt to foist partition on Vietnam. When Ho arrived in Paris in late June to be greeted by Marius Moutet, the Minister for Overseas Territories, it was inevitable that the talks would go nowhere.

By this stage, a dispirited Leclerc had been recalled to France, assuming that his mission had been completed, but also appreciating that he was under a political cloud because of his liberal approach to Vietnam's nationalists. During the Fontainebleau conference, Ho unexpectedly called on him. Leclerc knew better than to criticize d'Argenlieu publicly, or

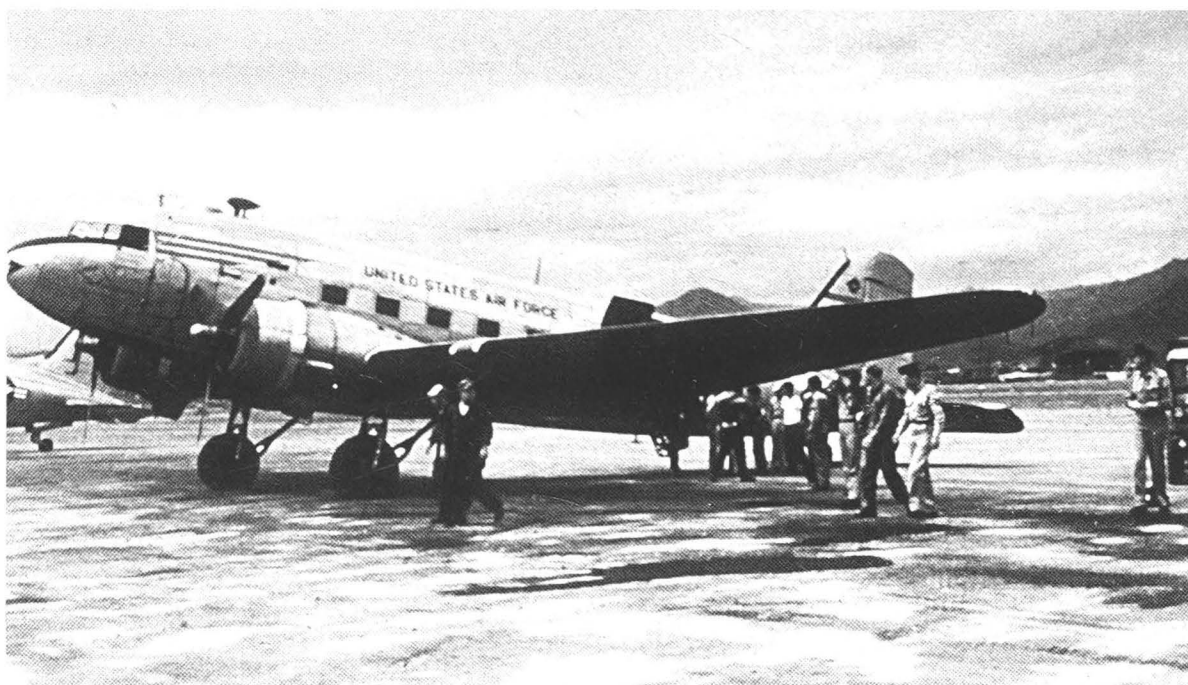
offer any intervention that would ultimately do more harm than good. He was also not duped by Ho Chi Minh's friendly 'Uncle Ho' persona.

Ho Chi Minh signed an agreement that September, but it did not go far enough for Giap, who resumed violence both against the French and their supporters, and even against the moderate Vietnamese nationalists. Between them, d'Argenlieu and Giap ensured that Indochina would not be spared all-out war.

To block supplies reaching the Viet Minh, and to reassert French political authority in the north, soldiers moved to seize Haiphong's custom houses on 15 October 1946. After street fighting broke out on 23 November, the French navy bombarded the port. This reportedly resulted in the deaths of 6,000 Vietnamese civilians. There could be no turning back now. Full, open conflict commenced on 19 December 1946, with a rising in Haiphong heralding the start of the First Indochina War. It took a week of fighting to clear the Viet Minh from the city.

Leclerc immediately found himself summoned by France's new socialist prime minister, Léon Blum, who wanted him to act as his personal representative in Indochina. There he would assess the situation and offer advice. De Gaulle warned Leclerc that this was a purely political appointment that would cause nothing but trouble, but after his first family Christmas in nine years, Leclerc flew back to Indochina.

He was in an impossible position. He had no authority to act as an intermediary with Ho Chi Minh, nor was he military commander. Likewise, his liberal approach was widely frowned upon by Paris and the colonial authorities. Leclerc knew from French history that France had faced similar situations before, under Napoleon I in Spain and Napoleon III in Mexico. He visited both north and south Vietnam and quickly recommended reinforcing the French garrison, knowing full well that France, in the face of the growing Vietnamese insurgency, would have to negotiate from a position of strength.



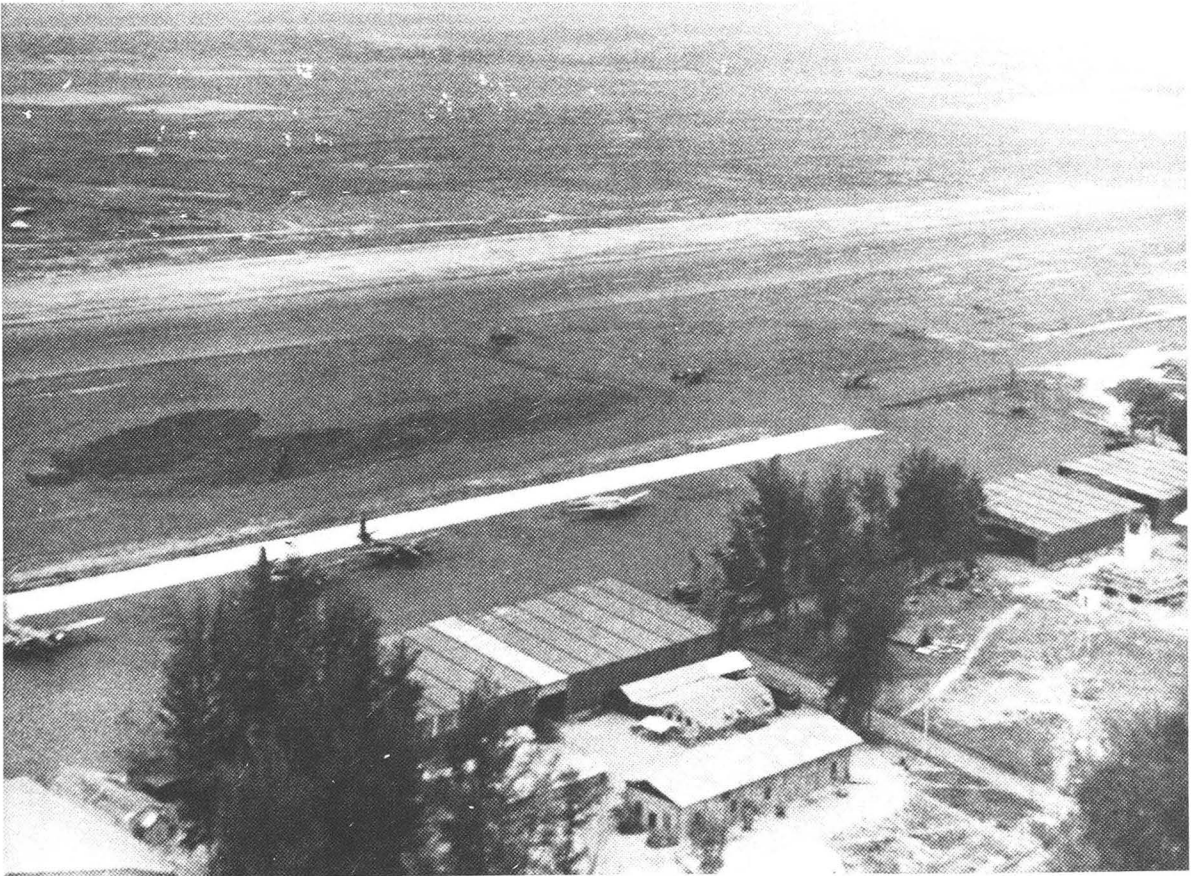
The American C-47 Skytrain played a key role in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

When he returned to France, he was offered the role of military commander in Indochina, but he declined, not wishing to work with the intransigent d'Argenlieu again. Then Ramadier, Blum's successor, even offered him d'Argenlieu's job.

However, Leclerc's conditions were unpalatable, for he wanted an end to direct French provincial administration and negotiations with the Viet Minh. Also, in return for full independence within the French Union, France would retain only a limited military presence. Leclerc argued that full military re-conquest would require 350,000 troops, or 115,000 to negotiate from a position of strength. Either figure was something the French government would not agree to or fund.

Once more, de Gaulle advised Leclerc against taking the post, pointing out that the removal of d'Argenlieu would cause a loss of French prestige. In addition, Leclerc would find himself a scapegoat for all the woes of Indochina. He agreed with de Gaulle and declined the job. Leclerc remarked, 'Colonial empires all have their period of greatness but are destined to disappear sooner or later. Let us hope that ours will disappear in good circumstances.'

It was not to be. As for Leclerc, he was sent to North Africa instead, where he found the situation not dissimilar to Indochina. He was killed in late 1947 in a plane crash in Algeria. In Indochina, if the 6 March agreement had been fully honoured by Paris, the disastrous following seven years could have been avoided and the French military not set upon the road to Dien Bien Phu.



French aircraft at Tourane (Dan Nang).

6. FRANCE'S EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

France had a long history of fighting colonial wars and saw Indochina as just another inconvenient colonial revolt that needed to be suppressed in the usual manner. This approach was a mistake, but once the Korean War broke out, it was perhaps understandable.

In Korea, the communists had very much gone straight for the conventional-warfare phase. The result was that the French assumed they could bludgeon the Viet Minh into submission through the use of superior strength and firepower. What they did not take into account was the strength of the Viet Minh's ideology. In addition, they were fighting for their country – the French were not.

The spearhead for France reclaiming her colonies was the Foreign Legion. It had a proud and colourful history. During its formative years, the Legion had fought all around the world, including in Indochina. In 1883–84, legionnaires took part in the storming of the forts at Son Tay and Bac Ninh, both held by Chinese irregulars. When the fighting finally came to an end a decade later, the Legion's battalions formed the Régiment de Marche d'Africa au Tonkin, who helped keep the peace largely undisturbed until 1941.



The French Expeditionary Force deployed the U.S. M24 Chaffee light tank to Indochina. Its main weapon was a 75mm gun.

This tough force fought with distinction during the Second World War. Afterwards, there was no shortage of foreign volunteers trying to escape or forget their troubled pasts. The Legion was happy to turn a blind eye, even to criminals or those who had committed war crimes. During the Indochina war, the Legion's strength would reach 30,000 men. Their training and administrative base at Sidi-bel-Abbès, sixty miles south of Oran in northwest Algeria, in May 1945 started the creation of a *régiment de marche* to be sent to re-occupy Indochina. Most of the Legion contingent in Indochina, numbering 20,000 men, were deployed in Tonkin during the second half of the war. Inevitably, they were to play a key role in the fighting at Dien Bien Phu.

Although the French sought to regain control of Saigon and southern Vietnam in the summer of 1945, it was not until the following March that the French Expeditionary Force was able to enter northern Vietnam. In the meantime, in October 1945, General Leclerc arrived in Saigon with elements of the French 2nd Armoured Division and the 3rd and 9th colonial infantry divisions. They were reinforced by the 2nd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment (REI) that landed in February 1946, followed by the 13th Foreign Legion Demi Brigade in March and the 3rd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment between April and June. A 3,000-strong naval brigade was also deployed to patrol Indochina's numerous waterways.

Over the next few years, French parachute units, who were to become famous in Indochina, began to arrive, including the 1st, 2nd and 5th colonial commando parachute battalions (BCCP) and the 1st Chasseurs Parachute Regiment. By the end of 1948, French paras had made forty combat jumps, three of which involved over 1,000 paratroops. The 1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion (BEP) arrived late that year and the 1st Indochinese Parachute Company was formed. By mid-1949, the French Union Forces in Vietnam totalled almost 150,000. Most of the fighting, though, was conducted by some 5,700 French paratroops. The most important arrivals that year were the 3rd and 6th BCCP, the 2nd BEP and the 5th REI.

France's colonial forces were always seen as the poorer cousins of the metropolitan French army. In Indochina, this meant that the local commander-in-chief had no autonomy. He was answerable to his military superiors in Paris and his political masters in Paris and Hanoi. Even when the role of commander-in-chief and High Commissioner were combined in 1950 under General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, political interference continued unabated.

In France, the politicians played to the gallery, with a war that was very unpopular with the electorate. This often led to extraordinarily foolhardy decisions. For example, in 1950, at the point that the Viet Minh were taking the Cao Bang ridge defences, the government cut the size of the forces in Indochina by 9,000 men. Also, to curry favour with the French public, conscripts could only serve in France, Algeria (considered part of France) and French-occupied Germany.

The result of this was that all French citizens sent to Indochina had to be volunteers. Inevitably, this greatly restricted the French contingent. French volunteers never accounted for more than half the total of the French Expeditionary Force – the average was about 52,000, or slightly over a third. What it meant was that the bulk of the ethnic French units bore the brunt of the fighting. They also made up most of the mobile reserve. As mobile infantry, French soldiers travelled in half-tracks, with the support of American-supplied M4 Sherman and M24 Chaffee tanks, as well as armoured cars. Their normal

infantry fire power of carbines, sub-machine guns, 60mm and 81mm mortars and .50in heavy machine guns was boosted by artillery. This included 75mm field guns, as well as 105mm and 155mm howitzers.

The paratroop units, which formed the cutting edge of most operations were largely self-contained, though relied on the air force for transport. Initially, transport aircraft were always in short supply. It was not until the early 1950s that American-supplied C-47 Dakotas (or Skytrains) and C-119 'Flying Boxcars' were available to replace the last of the French-built Junkers Ju-52s called Toucans, a hangover from the Second World War. By 1954, the first American-supplied H-19B helicopters also became available.

The French air force's main role, as well as supplying the ground forces, was to provide direct support, especially for troops in contact. Principal aircraft included American B-26 Marauder bombers and F8F Bearcat fighters, along with Canadian-built Beaver and French Morane 500 Cricket reconnaissance aircraft. The French navy provided coastal fire support and river patrols, along with Privateer maritime bombers and F4U Corsair fighters.

The paucity of French regulars meant deploying colonial troops from other parts of the French Union. Throughout the conflict, Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian and Senegalese troops served in Indochina. Commanded by French officers, they were organized and equipped the same as French regulars. One exception to this rule was the Algerian units. Due to Algeria being considered part of metropolitan France, they were allowed native officers although Algerian losses were lumped in with the 15,000 North Africans killed in Indochina – indicating they were not truly considered 'French'.

At the close of 1952, there were around 175,000 troops in Indochina, comprising 54,000 French, 30,000 North Africans, 18,000 Africans, 20,000 Legionnaires and 53,000 Indochinese. The French air force deployed 10,000 personnel and the navy 5,000. Local national forces were also quite sizeable. At Dien Bien Phu, nearly half the members of 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Light Infantry, were Vietnamese.

The French arrived in Indochina with a very wide variety of weapons because of the post-war French army's reliance on America and Britain for arms. One of the most common was the U.S. M1 carbine. The selective-fire M2 and folding-stock M1A1 were also used by French paras. Rifles included the American M1 Garand, British SMLE, French MAS-36, and its folding-stock derivative, the MAS-36CR39 paratrooper carbine. In the early stages, the French fought with the American M1A1 Thompson and M3 'Grease-gun' sub-machine guns as well as the British Sten. By the 1950s, the French-made MAT-49 had largely replaced these.

The standard squad-level light machine gun was the French FM24/29, which first saw combat in Morocco in 1926. French forces also employed the British Bren light machine gun. Legionnaires deployed to Indochina in 1946 with the Bren Mk III, though this again was eventually replaced with French-made weapons. Support weapons such as heavy machine guns, mortars and recoilless rifles tended to be of American manufacture. Ironically, the Viet Minh were armed by China with American weapons captured in Korea, which were usually newer models than the French had, who were reliant on Second World War surplus.

The French employed Second World War vintage tanks and armoured fighting vehicles. The standard tank of the French Expeditionary Force was the American M5A1 light tank, although it was superseded by the American M24 Chaffee from 1944 onwards under



As well as a coaxial .30 calibre machine gun, French Bisons were armed with a .50 calibre heavy machine gun.

the U.S. Military Aid Program. It remained in service throughout the war. The Chaffees were dubbed 'Bisons' by the French troops, while the Viet Minh knew them as 'Oxen'.

The French also employed the ubiquitous American M4 Sherman medium tank, M36B2 tank destroyer and M8 self-propelled howitzers. Motorized infantry was transported in M3 half-tracks. The M8 variant of the latter, mounting a 75mm gun, was also used in Indochina. The tank destroyers were initially deployed in case the Chinese committed armour to the fighting in Tonkin, but instead they ended up acting in a fire-support role.

To support amphibious operations in Indochina's flooded paddy fields vast river deltas and swamps, the expeditionary force operated American M29C Weasel amphibian cargo carriers (known to the French as 'Crabes') and tracked landing vehicles known as the Alligator. Both were likewise veterans of the Second World War. The LVT(A)4, armed with a 75mm howitzer, packed a particular punch. The Crabes, although only armed with a machine gun, were eventually formed into effective amphibious fighting units by the Foreign Legion, who likewise used the LVTs.

At the start of the fighting, the tanks were parcelled out in penny packets to protect vulnerable convoys and static outposts. This made them difficult to maintain, thereby reducing their effectiveness. Only after General de Lattre de Tassigny took charge in 1951 were the armoured units reorganized with their own supporting infantry. This led to the creation of the *sous-groupe blindé*, comprising a squadron of tanks and two mechanized infantry companies, and a *groupe mobile* with up to three battalions of infantry, an artillery battery and up to a squadron of tanks.

France attempted to tap into the huge manpower of Indochina, but the French were wary of training a fifth column and local units were never fully trusted. It did not help that the Vietnamese and Cambodians were traditional enemies. The Vietnamese viewed the Chinese in much the same manner. General de Lattre, in 1951, instructed each French unit in Vietnam to form a locally recruited second battalion. He also opened an officer cadet school, followed by two more for reserve officers.

A small Vietnamese National Army was formed under French command, along with anti-guerrilla units raised particularly among the mountain tribes. By 1952, the Vietnamese National Army numbered 50,000 men, the Laotian army 15,000 and the Cambodian army another 10,000. Although the full potential of these Indochinese forces was never realized, some 27,000 Indochinese died fighting for the French.

French training efforts for local Vietnamese units were concentrated in the north. In late 1948, they established the Vietnamese National Military Academy in the city of Hue. This was designed to train infantry platoon leaders with a nine-month officers' course. It moved to Dalat two years later because of better local weather. The latter was home to the armour school, but this moved to Thu Duc, along with the engineer school. By the end of 1951, there were 800 Vietnamese officers serving.



The French infantry were also armed with the American .30 calibre medium machine gun.

The French also set up the national non-commissioned officers' academy in Quang Yen Province, Tonkin, in 1951. The following year, this was followed by a staff college in Hanoi. This was as a result of the French Expeditionary Force setting up a tactical instruction centre, designed to train mobile group, battalion and company commanders. Notably, intelligence and logistics schools were not established until the late 1950s. This was to prove to be a serious omission on the part of the French.

French forces in Indochina included a postscript from Korea. The French Bataillon de Corée (Korea Battalion), which was raised from volunteers from all branches of the French army, metropolitan, colonial and Foreign Legion to serve in Korea, arrived in Indochina in October 1953. This formed the cadre of the two-battalion-strong Régiment de Corée. This was practically destroyed in the central Highlands, around An Khe and Pleiku, while serving with the Groupe Mobile 100 in June–July 1954.

The French logistical supply chain, stretching all the way back to Algeria and France, proved to be the expeditionary force's Achilles heel. In Paris, the war was not a priority. Many either did not support it or simply saw it as an overblown police operation. Shipping or flying ammunition and weapons to Indochina was lengthy and expensive, and was again unpopular for this reason.

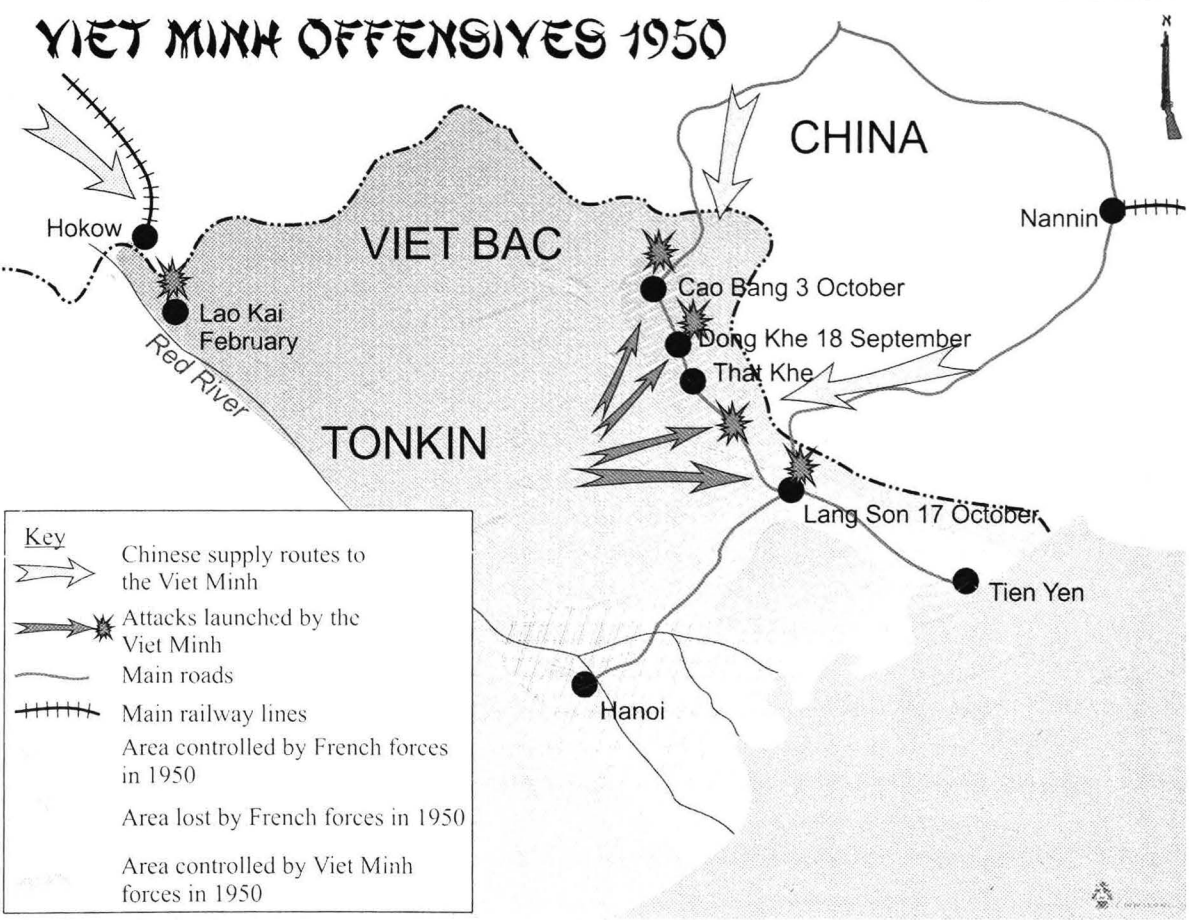
Once in-country, the high command in Hanoi struggled to distribute supplies to the troops. In the immediate Red River Delta area around Hanoi, and indeed in the south, it was not such a problem, but getting supplies to the outlying garrisons and large operations was another matter.

The French were reliant on two methods of supporting their soldiers. The first was land-based, using the roads and rivers. Whilst this was relatively easy to do, both were always very vulnerable to ambush. Viet Minh attacks on supply barges on the Black River trying to reach the garrison at Hao Binh contributed to General Salan's decision to abandon the town. French airlift capabilities were simply not sufficient. Initially, they had to rely on old Ju-52s, but even with the arrival of newer C-47s and C-119s, they could never muster more than 100 transport planes. They were required to run supply flights, move reinforcements and drop paratroops. By the time of Dien Bien Phu, they were stretched to the limit.

7. THE HAND OF MAO

By 1949, French intelligence in Paris was increasingly concerned about how the war against communism in China was going. Despite being equipped with millions of dollars of American weapons, Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists were rapidly losing. The city of Hsuehchow (Xuzhou) on the North China Plain was in the news bulletins for all the wrong reasons. Chiang was defeated in Manchuria in 1948, with the loss of 30,000 soldiers and all of their equipment. By the end of the year, his remaining armies were completely cut off at Hsuehchow.

Chiang was betrayed by General Liu Fei, his military assistant, who revealed the nationalists' strategy to the enemy. On 10 January 1949, some 320,000 nationalist troops were forced to surrender south of Hsuehchow. This meant that the communists could march down the Yangtze River, which runs through the very heart of southern China. Ten days later, with his government in chaos, Chiang resigned as president of the Chinese Republic. In April and May, the communists entered Nanking on the Yangtze, and then Shanghai. Once the nationalists were looking to flee to the island of Formosa (Taiwan), it was only a matter of time before Mao's four-million-strong People's Liberation Army reached the border with Indochina.



The French military were now taking the situation in Indochina very seriously. France's most senior soldier, General Georges Revers, Chief of the General Staff, flew to Indochina in May 1949 to assess the situation in person. He and his fellow generals knew that Mao's imminent victory would drastically transform the status quo in the region. During his briefings in Saigon and Hanoi, it soon became apparent that once Mao was up against the border backing the Viet Minh, the French military would be unable to hold the frontier.

Revers's report recommended that Lao Kai on the Red River in northern Tonkin, which was particularly isolated, and the Cao Bang-Lang Son ridge on the border northeast of Hanoi, be abandoned, rather than needlessly sacrificing the scattered garrisons. The units could be better used in strengthening the Red River Delta defences. Lao Kai was sometimes referred to as 'the gateway to China'. The delta, General Revers reasoned, would provide a base to conduct pacification operations, followed by a counter-offensive into the Viet Minh's heartland in the Viet Bac.

Revers made an astute strategic assessment that was largely ignored by the politicians. He had accurately predicted Giap's forthcoming campaign. Despite Revers's recommendations, it was felt that the Cao Bang-Lang Son ridge could not be abandoned, because it sat astride Route Coloniale 4. All the time that it was occupied, it prevented Chinese aid from reaching Giap in Viet Bac. This ignored Revers's assessment that the ridge could not be held in the face of a concerted attack.

Although the French had reinserted themselves into Indochina and its major cities, they never really took control of the surrounding countryside. In reality, their authority was confined to the main towns and the roads connecting them and the outlying forts. Even in their Tonkin heartland around Hanoi, guerrilla activity and intelligence gathering by Ho Chi Minh's forces remained unchecked.

The key to the defence of Hanoi and the port of Haiphong was the Red River Delta. Both sides were well aware of this. It shaped their strategic thinking and was to dominate the war until Dien Bien Phu. Giap's immediate task, as predicted, was to secure the very long frontier with China, which ran all the way from the junction with the Laotian border in the northwest, and to the Gulf of Tonkin in the northeast. This would ensure the free flow of Chinese instructors, weapons and ammunition. The campaigning season was limited, so he needed to act before the rains from May to October 1950 severely hampered mobility.

General Wei Guo-qing, leading a Chinese military advisory group some 280 strong, arrived in April 1950. Their role was to guide Ho Chi Minh on the best tactics and strategy to use against the French. It is not entirely clear just how much influence they had, but the size of the group suggests that it was quite considerable. Wei no doubt espoused Mao's doctrine of 'man-over-weapons' to defeat superior French firepower. As manpower was never a problem, the Chinese Communists were advocates of the 'human-wave' tactic, whereby an enemy was simply swamped and overrun. In Indochina, this was to flounder in the face of the French air force's guns, bombs and napalm.

Giap massed fourteen infantry and three artillery battalions with which to attack the French border forts. He struck first at Lao Kai, not far from the Chinese border, in February 1950. The small French garrison found themselves being bombarded by heavy mortars before being overrun. Then, northeast of Hanoi, he attacked the vulnerable Cao Bang-Lang Son ridge. Both these two towns, between which were French posts at



French troops coming ashore on the coast of Annam, July 1950.

Dong Khe and That Khe, sat astride two different roads from China. These in turn were linked by the road that ran south all the way to the French-held port of Tien Yen.

On 25 May 1950, the Viet Minh took the sandbagged outpost at Dong Khe, midway along the ridge, wiping out two companies of North African troops. This was a typical fort, built on a hilltop after the jungle had been cleared from the summit. Giap employed four battalions, supported by small artillery pieces and mortars to overcome the 800-strong garrison. It was the first time that the Viet Minh used the Chinese human-wave tactic. However, his men had to withdraw two days later, when a French parachute battalion arrived on the scene.

In July, General Chen Geng arrived from China at the request of Ho Chi Minh to help with Wei's advisory group. This again indicates that Mao was exerting some considerable influence on the conduct of the war in Indochina. Chen also encouraged Ho and Giap to renew their efforts to take the border forts. At the end of the year, he was to depart for Korea, leaving Wei in charge.

Both sides waited for the summer rains to ease before fighting resumed. By this stage, General Marcel Carpentier, commander-in-chief of the French Expeditionary Force, had about 10,000 troops protecting the scattered forts on the ridge. Giap singled out Dong Khe once again, encircling it with his artillery and mortars. The Viet Minh 174th Regiment built a full-scale replica not far away to facilitate lengthy and detailed training. Nothing was left to chance.

Two companies of legionnaires from the 3rd Foreign Legion Regiment, some 260 men, who were holding Dong Khe were shelled all day on 16 September 1950. They only had two artillery pieces, consisting of a 75mm gun and a 105mm howitzer with which to reply.

Then at dusk, six Viet Minh battalions swarmed forward under covering mortar fire. Desperate hand-to-hand fighting followed. They had killed or wounded 140 of the defenders and driven them out of three of their four sandbagged positions by the following night. The legionnaires put up a heroic defence, but were finally overwhelmed on 18 September. A relief column formed by the Legion's elite 1st Parachute Battalion, who were dropped at nearby That Khe, were ambushed and driven off.

The garrison at Cao Bang at the northern end of the ridge was now cut off from its delta support. General Carpentier finally conceded that Route Coloniale 4 could not be held. On 3 October, it was decided to evacuate Cao Bang. The 1,500 retreating troops and accompanying civilian refugees, however, had first to get past Viet Minh-held Dong Khe to reach That Khe and Lang Son. What followed was a disaster. Despite the French air force flying 844 sorties in support, the French suffered very heavy losses. French pilots were hampered by low cloud and ground mist that helped conceal the Viet Minh's movements.

On 9 October, the withdrawing garrison, plus a 3,500-strong relief force from That Khe, were both separately ambushed and scattered. The two four-battalion-strong French columns were soon surrounded by thirty Viet Minh battalions and overwhelmed. The two columns never managed to meet on the road, and when some of the survivors regrouped, they were attacked for a third time. All order vanished, and the French lost



General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, third from the right, following the liberation of Marseilles in 1944.

about 4,000 men in the surrounding jungle. A parachute battalion was annihilated while conducting rear-guard actions. Lang Son was abandoned by Carpentier. Likewise, the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the Legion's 3rd Regiment were severely mauled.

By 17 October 1950, all the forts had fallen, resulting in 6,000 French casualties. Giap had secured a strategically important piece of border territory, as well as capturing enough French weapons for an entire division. These included 9,200 rifles, 900 machine guns, 125 mortars and 13 heavy guns, as well as 450 trucks. French morale was crushed, and a wave of alarm passed through the French military and civilian population in Indochina. When the news reached Paris, it was greeted with a mixture of despair and outrage. Heads had to roll. The government's response was to sack both High Commissioner Léon Pignon and General Carpentier.

The French hold on northern Tonkin, Hanoi and the Red River Delta was now precarious. In France, the war was increasingly disliked, with the Cold War in Europe a national preoccupation. The wounded from Indochina were routed home through provincial airports lest they be greeted by hostile demonstrators in Paris. Conscripts could not go



De Lattre, joint
Commander-in-Chief
and High Commissioner,
Indochina.

unless they specifically volunteered, but most were deterred from doing so by a lack of faith in the conflict and by understandably anxious parents. There was an atmosphere of tension, with supplies for Indochina being sabotaged on French trains and in ports. Even getting donated blood out to the troops was problematic. France's communists were opposed to the war, and there were dark mutterings that they were behind the disruption.

The Viet Minh's supply routes from China were now secure, meaning they were now in a position to confront the French with much greater strength than before. Heartened by his victory, Ho Chi Minh boasted that he would be in Hanoi within a matter of weeks. Giap was encouraged to go over to the 'open-battle' phase of their grand strategy. They planned to launch an all-out assault on the delta region, with a view to overwhelming the remaining French strongholds, which would isolate Hanoi and force the French out. What they had not bargained for, however, was the arrival of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as joint High Commissioner and commander-in-chief in December 1950.

De Lattre, like de Gaulle, was a war hero and a keeper of the faith. Like de Gaulle, he was autocratic, but he loved his men. He had led the French First Army during the liberation of the Riviera and the long march into southern Germany. This force had included the veteran Algerian and Moroccan divisions. They were the saviours of Strasbourg and Colmar. De Lattre first arrived back on liberated French soil on 16 August 1944 with his 16-year-old son Bernard. De Gaulle had granted the boy special permission to join the army and his father. The diminutive general was photographed with his young son proudly towering over him. During his early career, de Lattre senior had fought at Verdun and during France's wars in Morocco. He was exactly what Indochina's demoralized garrison needed.

In truth, de Lattre was not the first choice for such a difficult mission. Other veteran generals had been approached. Juin, busy in Morocco, had declined, while Koenig said he would only go if the Indochina garrison was bolstered with conscripts. De Lattre was serving as NATO's land forces commander, under General Dwight Eisenhower as Allied Supreme Commander, with Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery as Eisenhower's deputy. It was not an easy relationship, especially as the other two always saw themselves as the dominant military partners.

General de Lattre was very much a French version of Montgomery, and putting them together was never a good idea. It was a titanic clash of egos. Their relationship was so tumultuous it was almost to the point of outright hatred. Their squabbles over the chain of command for the Western European Union were so corrosive that it eventually helped derail France's commitment to NATO. De Lattre was serving as Inspector General of the French armed forces when Montgomery got him appointed commander WEU land forces. Once in post, he would not recognize Montgomery's authority, which led to very public accusations of disloyalty.

Eventually, after a particularly unpleasant confrontation on 10 May 1950, a weeping de Lattre was reconciled with Montgomery. Before his departure for Indochina, de Lattre had tea with Montgomery, who was celebrating his sixty-third birthday. He was touched when the old field marshal cut an extra piece of cake for Bernard de Lattre, who was already serving in Indochina. Whatever their differences, they were brothers-in-arms and they understood each other.

The young Minister for Overseas Territories, François Mitterrand, warned the 62-year-old de Lattre that Indochina would be a poisoned chalice. He cautioned that it could wreck his health and his reputation. Certainly, at that stage in his life, de Lattre did not need this

appointment. No doubt he was astute enough to realize that the fighting in Indochina would swing on the pendulum of the escalating Korean War and the meddling of China. Washington had made it clear that it would not tolerate the spread of communism down the Korean peninsula, whatever the cost. Many senior French officers saw Indochina as another front in the same war. The Soviet Union, China, and communism in general wherever they raised their heads, needed to be contained.

Nonetheless, de Lattre had two good reasons for going. Firstly, Lieutenant Bernard de Lattre was there and writing home with very frank assessments of what was happening on the ground. Bernard, like his father, was a soldier through and through. During the Second World War, he had been wounded, earning the Médaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre. Secondly, every year hundreds of young officers coming out of the Saint Cyr military academy were being killed in Indochina. On 23 October 1950, Bernard had written to his mother: 'Tell Father we need him, without him it will go wrong.' What father could refuse such an appeal from his son? De Lattre felt he could make a difference.

De Lattre did not go alone, for he summoned many of his wartime comrades. He needed men he could trust and rely on. From his 1944–45 staff, he took generals Allard and Salan, and colonels Beaufre and Cogny. They also rallied others, such as General de Linarès, who was already in-country. Great pomp and ceremony was made of de Lattre's arrival in Saigon, where he pointedly ignored his disgraced predecessor, General Carpentier. Once in Hanoi, he reviewed the troops and then addressed his staff. He said it was for the young officers that he had accepted this challenging assignment.

There were no promises on the table. Paris offered no reinforcements, and de Lattre could provide no easy victories. What he could promise them was firm leadership. De Lattre knew from Bernard that among the many shortcomings of the French army in Indochina, there was a lack of firm and purposeful command. This bred poor morale and it was something that had to be addressed immediately – the removal of Carpentier was a start. As well as this, de Lattre knew that his immediate task was to hold the Viet Minh at bay while the Red River Delta defences were strengthened.

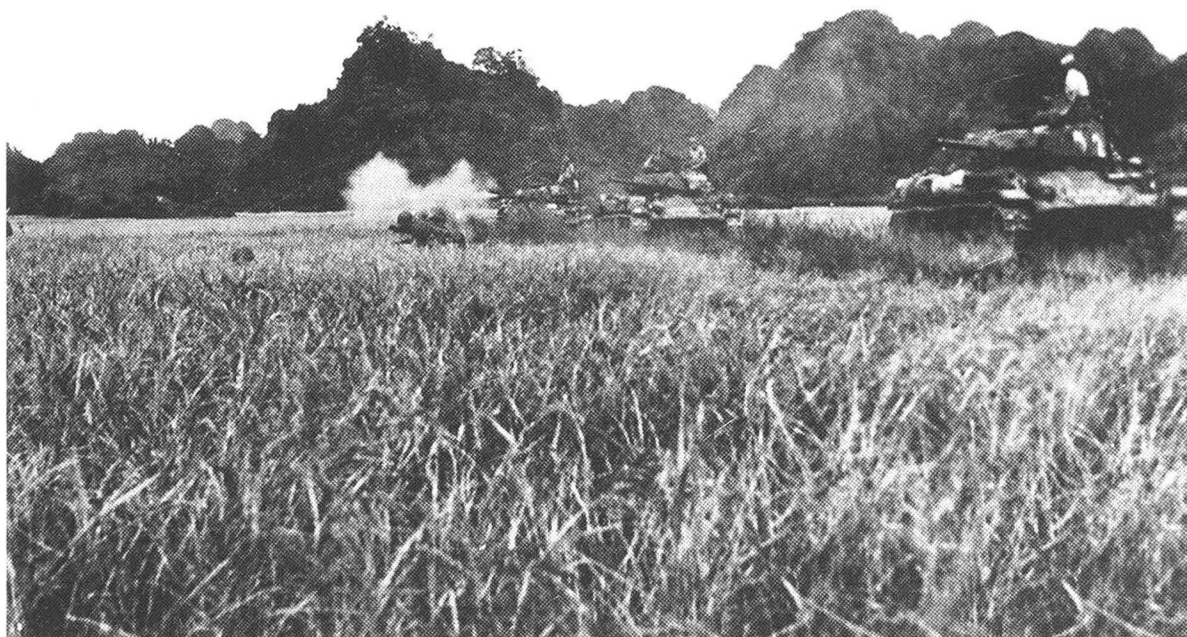
Salan was appointed deputy commander for northern Tonkin and de Linarès deputy commander of the delta area. The field command was divided into three divisions and the headquarters reorganized to improve civil/military liaison. While making his preparations, de Lattre lobbied for reinforcements but they would take time to reach him. Everything now hung in the balance.

8. BATTLE FOR THE RED RIVER

In the meantime, Giap was so close to Hanoi that he could not help himself, and decided to cut through the town of Vinh Yen just 65km northwest of the city. Once on the Red River, he could thrust southward. This, Giap and Ho assured themselves, would ensure a swift victory. They gathered a large force of some 22,000 men, comprising the 308th and 312th Viet Minh divisions. In total, there were over twenty-five battalion-size Viet Minh units. Giap, though, made the fatal mistake of making a direct assault on Hanoi without launching any diversionary attacks to dissipate French strength.

Although the French were seriously outnumbered, de Lattre prepared his defences at Vinh Yen very well. He had a thin protective screen of dug-in infantry before the town, inside there was a mobile group, while a second mobile force was deployed to the south, ready to counterattack. The first consisted mainly of North Africans, while the other comprised Senegalese and Muong tribesmen. In total, de Lattre could field only about 7,000 men.

On 13 January 1951, the Viet Minh swiftly pushed the screening French infantry back, moving into the hills between Vinh Yen and the south bank of the Red River. The French outpost at Bao Chuc was overrun without difficulty. The following day, when the first mobile group moved forward to reinforce the infantry at Bao Chuc, it was ambushed. Heavy losses were suffered, but the North Africans fought bravely and the survivors managed to pull back. The Viet Minh's massed human-wave attacks carried them forward towards their objective.



Bison tanks in paddy fields engaging Viet Minh positions.

Despite Viet Minh fighters being within 1,000yd of the airstrip, de Lattre flew into Vinh Yen in a rickety-looking spotter plane to take command on 14 January. His chief of staff was aghast at the great personal risk the French commander-in-chief was taking and radioed his disapproval. De Lattre's response was, 'Well then, come and get me out.'

His presence, though, immediately boosted morale and ensured that the garrison received the resources it needed to repel the enemy. While the second mobile group moved forward, he ordered a massive airlift of reinforcements from as far south as Cochinchina. Allard, the chief transport officer, had to conduct a three-day air-and-road redeployment to bolster the defences. In the air, he could muster just fifteen elderly transports.

An opening east of Vinh Yen could have been exploited by the Viet Minh, but Giap lost his opportunity. Thanks to the vigour brought by de Lattre, and the growing strength of the French air force, the Vinh Yen defences were hurriedly consolidated, while the Viet Minh were held in the hills for twenty-four hours. When Giap opened his attack on 16 January with the 308th Division, his men were cut to pieces as they surged forward in massed human waves. De Lattre recklessly flew over the battlefield in his spotter plane, assessing the situation and directing fire.

He quickly decided to summon almost every combat aircraft available in Indochina and to commit the last of his reserves in an effort to thwart Giap. The following day, a newly formed mobile group, consisting of two Moroccan and one para battalion, joined the fight with considerable air support. The French air force played its part, dropping napalm for the first time on a large scale on 17 January to break up the Viet Minh attacks. The blistering heat incinerated those caught in the open, leaving a trail of charred and smouldering corpses. Those on the periphery, their uniforms ablaze, ran screaming until shot down, or they could roll in the soil to smother the searing flames. It was a hideous sight, but it had the desired effect.

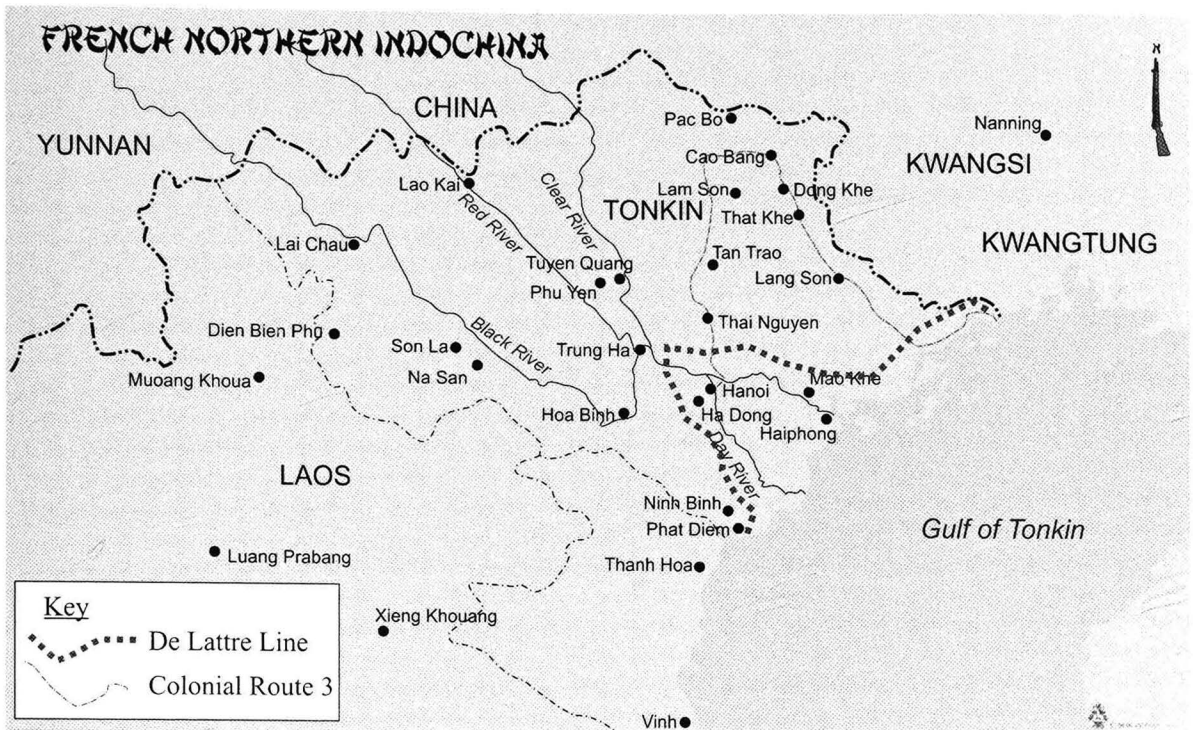
Undeterred, Giap renewed his attack, using the 312th Division. They were stopped in their tracks by French fighter-bombers, again using napalm. Nonetheless, the pointless fighting continued well into the afternoon of the 17th. Two days later, it was all over. The Viet Minh had suffered some 5,000 casualties, comprising 1,600 fatalities, at least 3,000 wounded, and 480 captured. To his dismay, Giap had thrown away his opportunity to end the war. The French lost 43 killed, 160 wounded, and 545 missing or captured.

The Viet Minh had come very close to overrunning Vinh Yen, but that was little solace for such heavy losses. Once the French air force was committed in strength and dropping napalm, Giap should have saved more of his men by calling a halt to the attack and withdrawing. Instead, he very clearly signalled that he was prepared to sacrifice his men to achieve his goals. Giap had every faith in their morale and their commitment to the fight for independence, even to the death.

Vinh Yen provided a much-needed boost for the morale of the men of the French Expeditionary Force, proving to Paris that de Lattre was indeed the man for the job. He concluded that prepared defences, backed by mobile reserves and air power, was the best way to defeat the Viet Minh fighting a conventional war. This conclusion would shape French strategy and lead to Dien Bien Phu four years later.

During the battle at Vinh Yen, de Lattre called on Emperor Bao Dai, requesting more Vietnamese units and, with his candidate, for a new Vietnamese defence minister. Bao was not receptive, but after the French victory, he instructed his prime minister, Tran Van Huu, to dissolve the government and form a new one, including de Lattre's defence

Battle for the Red River

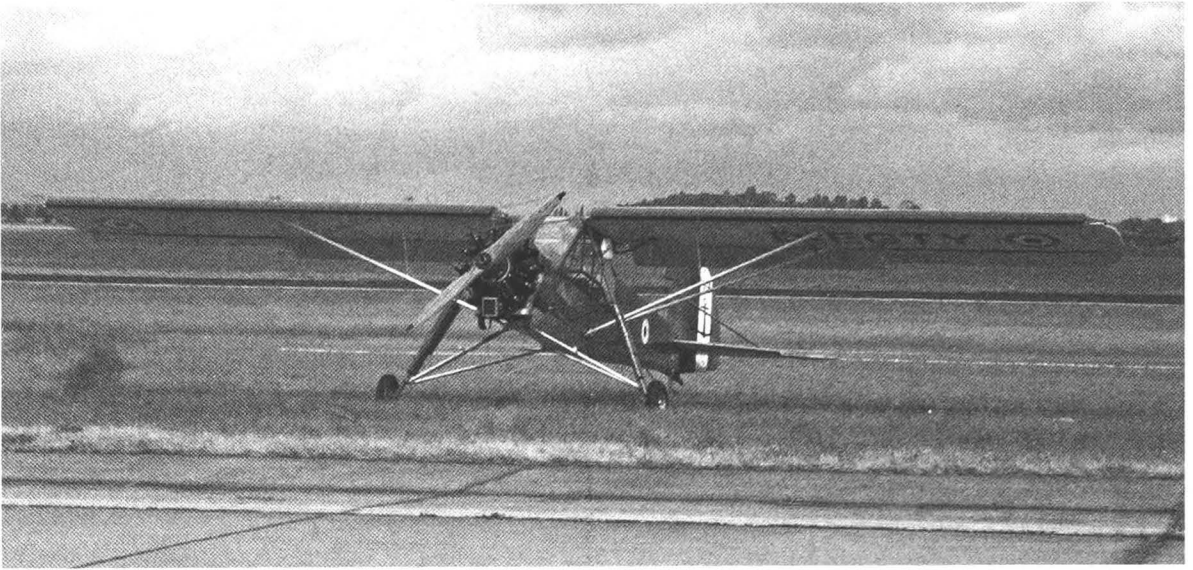


minister candidate, Nguyen Huu Tri. In a message to the Vietnamese, Bao made no mention of the French success, while the enraged de Lattre brazenly held a victory parade in order to salute his men. The Vietnamese government soon broke down, for which de Lattre held the emperor responsible.

De Lattre, now riding high with public and political opinion, understandably renewed his call for reinforcements. He asked Paris to provide twelve infantry battalions, and five artillery units plus support. This was met with opposition and much hand-wringing over how it would be funded. The accountants went to work, seeking to make savings. After much haggling, it was agreed that he could have nine battalions and three artillery units for just eighteen months. De Lattre was probably quietly pleased because, like any good general, he would have asked for more than he expected to receive. Paris also managed to persuade Washington to provide financial aid to pay for French military purchases, especially the equipment for new Vietnamese units. The only drawback was that the money would not be available until the autumn.

Elsewhere, the successes against Viet Minh operations in Amman, Cochinchina, Cambodia and Laos, released French troops for the more fiercely contested delta area. Also, some units were replaced by the newly formed Vietnamese battalions. In Tonkin, de Lattre could muster 68,500 French Union and 18,000 Vietnamese soldiers. In stark contrast, Giap had around 170,000, including 112 battalions, each over 900 strong.

De Lattre decided to fly to Paris to press his case for more men, but twice he had to postpone his departure. The first delay was caused by the Vietnamese government crisis, the second by the fall of the Plevin government in Paris. Unfortunately for de Lattre, Plevin's successor, Queuille, saw the strengthening of the defence of Europe as a key priority in the face of the Red menace over more costly resources for Indochina. The only alternative in Europe was the rearmament of Germany, and no one was ready for that.



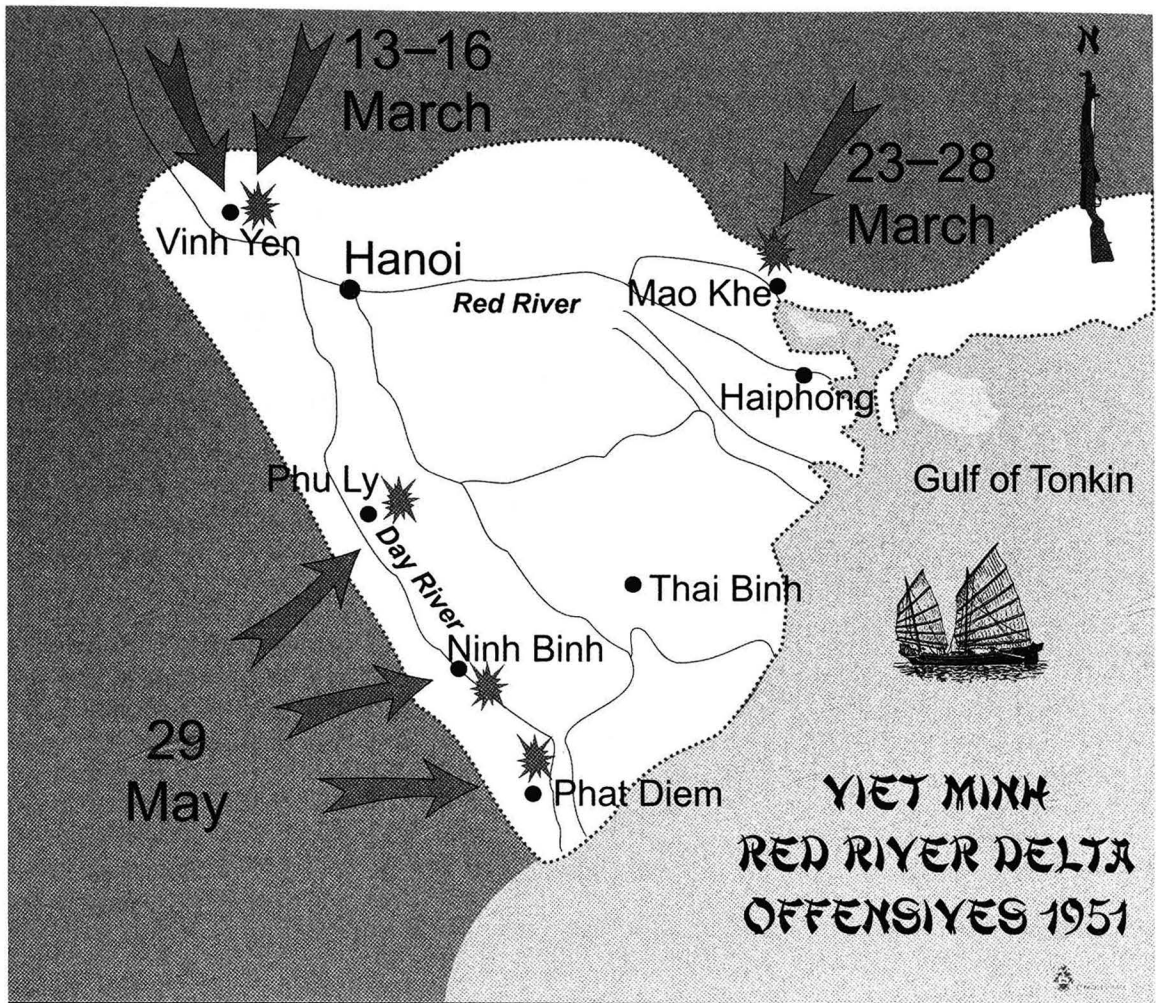
Morane-Saulnier Cricket spotter plane. General de Lattre landed at Vinh Yen aboard one of these aircraft.

To compound de Lattre's difficulties, the situation in Morocco and Tunisia was a growing cause for concern. It was at this point that his health began to decline due to painful problems with his right hip.

Giap was facing his own issues. The French victory at Vinh Yen had encouraged the creation of the defensive 'De Lattre Line' around the Red River Delta. The French set about constructing some 1,200 concrete blockhouses, running from Ha Long Bay, across to Vinh Yen, and then southeast to Phat Diem. While the rationale for these fortifications was self-evident, they signalled that the French were intent on tying down more of their troops, and that the defences were pointless if the areas behind them could not be pacified. De Lattre hoped that the blockhouses could be manned by local troops, while mixed French-Vietnamese commando units were developed as mobile strike groups to hunt down the Viet Minh. The military authorities were not keen on this combination, having little faith in the loyalty of Vietnamese soldiers.

To pre-empt the De Lattre Line, Giap had little option but to renew his offensive. As his attack to the north of Hanoi had failed, he shifted his efforts to the small town of Mao Khe, just 32km north of Haiphong. While the main attack was towards the port, it appears that the assault was to be supported by an insurgency behind French lines, intended to destabilize the whole of the delta. If Giap got to Haiphong, it would cause de Lattre major supply problems.

Giap was unable to hide his considerable preparations in the massif near Dong Trieu, which involved three divisions. His deception plans failed to work and the French were fully aware of the presence of five Viet Minh brigades (or small divisions), plus a large force of supporting coolie labour. When his assault commenced on the night of 23 March 1951, it had some success against the French outer defences. Three days later, Mao Khe was in danger as the 316th Viet Minh Division massed, ready to overwhelm the defenders. A bombardment by French naval vessels on the Do Bac River, however, caused the force to disperse, delaying the attack. On the 27th, the Viet Minh launched a massed assault on



Key

-  De Lattre defence line and area controlled by the French
-  Viet Minh lines of advance
-  Viet Minh attacks

French defences outside Mao Khe. Although there were some breakthroughs, the town was held.

De Lattre arrived back in Hanoi from Paris, feeling feverish and despondent. Once briefed, he quickly appreciated that Mao Khe, as it was at the exit from the massif, was the key to the battle. Reinforcements were sent up the river, arriving just as the Viet Minh had gained a foothold in the northern edge of the town. The enemy were thrown out and their advance temporarily halted.

Night air reconnaissance, used for the first time, and other intelligence suggested that the Viet Minh had retreated and abandoned any follow-up plans. De Lattre, however, was not convinced, surmising that the Viet Minh were using effective camouflage to hide their movements. He refused to redeploy his forces at Mao Khe, electing instead to place the troops on high alert.



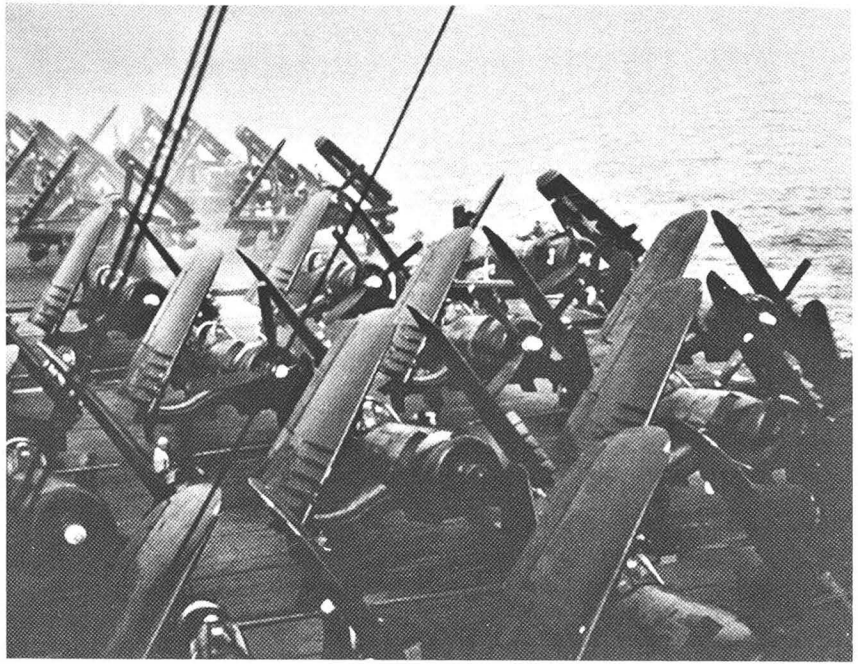
The U.S. first supplied Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat fighter-bombers such as these to the French in Indochina in January 1951. (Photo U.S. Navy)

Just as de Lattre had anticipated, on 28 March 1951, Giap threw his 316th Division into the assault. There was no subtlety in the attack. Human waves launched by twelve 1,000-strong units, were met by artillery, fighter-bombers and warships. Some of the attackers reached the wire, where they were mown down by French small-arms and machine-gun fire. Their bodies lay snagged in the wire like rag dolls, creating a path for those fortunate enough to have survived the deluge of firepower.

Those men who got past the wire, were engaged in vicious hand-to-hand combat. Pistols were fired at close quarter, rifles were used as clubs, bayonets as daggers. The Viet Minh were eventually beaten off with heavy losses. Afterwards, French and Vietnamese troops picked through the scattered, blood-splattered bodies. In five days of fighting, Giap's men suffered 3,000 casualties. It was yet another French victory, thanks to superior firepower and superb defensive tactics.

De Lattre did not wait for Giap to try again. Instead, he moved swiftly to stamp out the insurgency behind his lines in the delta. He ordered his first major sweep with Operation Méduse in mid-April 1951. This, under the local command of de Linarès, and involving three mobile groups, was an unqualified success. His second, Operation Reptile, proved

Vought AU-1 Corsair fighters on the USS *Saipan* being delivered to the Aéronautique Navale at Tourane (Da Nang), 1954.
(Photo R.H. Spanioer)



less successful, the French thwarted in part by the Viet Minh guerrillas' ability to blend in with local communities at will.

De Lattre's forces overran training bases and propaganda centres, and disrupted Viet Minh organization. Catching the fighters, however, remained another matter. To stop the guerrillas taking up arms again required a permanent military presence. He knew he had to conduct a hearts-and-minds campaign to sway the population who were caught in the middle.

After Vinh Yen, de Lattre took the Vietnamese prime minister to the scene of the battle, where he reaffirmed that the role of the French army in Vietnam was to secure a lasting independence. Otherwise, he warned, Indochina would fall to communism. He also took great pleasure in presenting Bernard de Lattre with his second Croix de Guerre after his conduct during the latest round of fighting.

De Lattre now felt that he could take time out, so he flew to Singapore to discuss the communist threat to Southeast Asia with the British and the Americans. Whilst the latter were sympathetic to the struggle against communism in Indochina, neither offered troops, even in the event of full intervention by Mao. Both countries had more than enough of their own troubles. De Lattre was about to follow up the conference with a visit to Washington to speed up American material and financial support, when the unbowed Giap struck yet again.

9. VICTORY ON THE DAY RIVER

Following Vinh Yen and Mao Khe, Giap was forced to reassess his flawed strategy. His direct assaults on Hanoi and Haiphong had failed, so he now concentrated his efforts to the south on the Day River. If he could seize this area, it would tie down de Lattre's reserves prior to a renewed effort on the Red River. The French commander in this area, Colonel Gambiez, was half expecting an attack, as this was a fertile part of the delta and the rice crop was approaching harvest. Giap appreciated that, this time, it was vital that the French were distracted from his main operation.

De Lattre and his commanders were therefore kept preoccupied. During April, the French had been kept busy by the Viet Minh 312th Division. This masked the redeployment of the 304th and 308th divisions, who marched to the South Delta Base to join the 320th Division. Giap planned to use them to strike at Phu Ly, Ninh Binh and Phat Diem on the meandering Day River. He proposed to repeat the tactics used for Dong Trieu, with a two-division frontal assault, and a third attacking the flank, while guerrilla operations created mayhem in the rear areas.

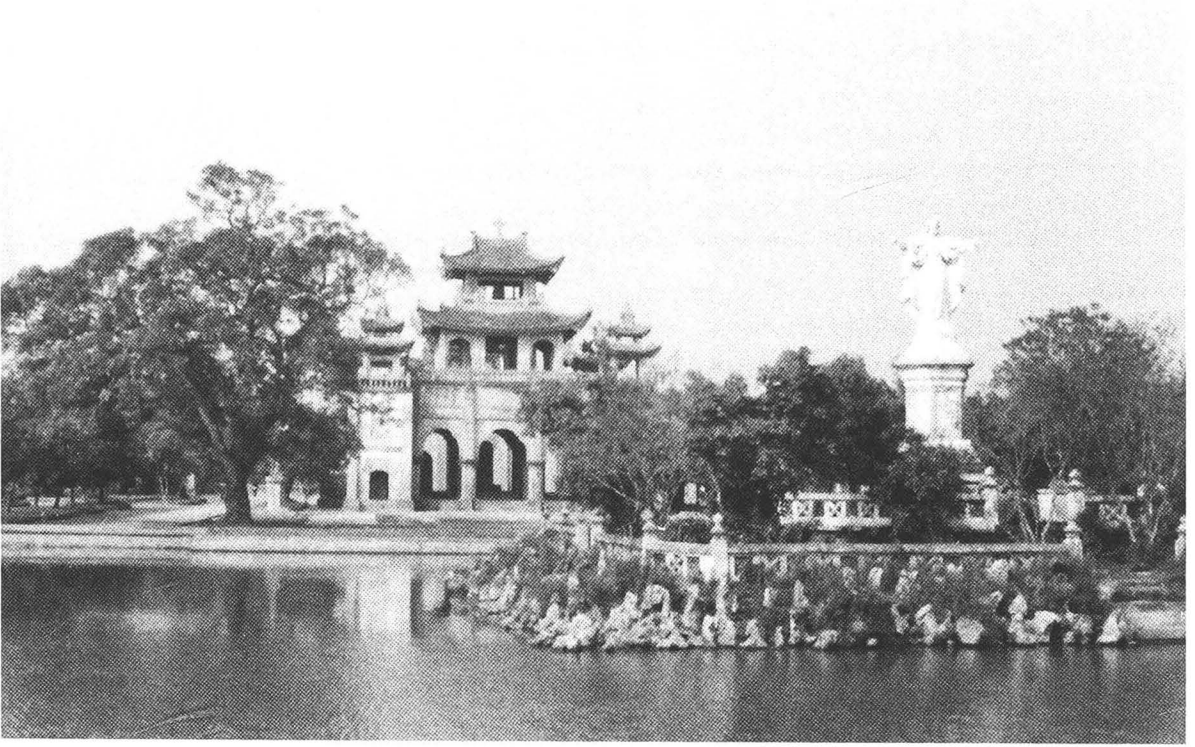
The weight of the attack conducted by the 304th and 308th divisions was to fall upon Ninh Binh and Phu Ly. This was designed to tie up French reserves, while, to the south, the 320th Division crossed the river at Phat Diem, linking up with a regiment that had infiltrated French lines a few days before. A move towards the coast near Thai Bin would sever the southern provinces of the delta. This would stop the French moving waterborne reinforcements north, leaving their flank exposed. In principle, it was a very sound plan.

Giap opened his operation on 29 May 1951, with the 304th and 308th divisions crossing the Day River to attack their objectives. In the process, they destroyed a number of French outposts and several gunboats. Late in the afternoon, the 320th Division also crossed the river in sampans at two points, directly opposite Phat Diem and to the southeast. Due to the rains, they soon became bogged down.

De Lattre reacted with characteristic decisiveness. Eight mobile groups and two para units met the Viet Minh. French bombs and shells rained down on the frontal assaults, soon bringing the assailants to a halt. On the water, French river patrols moved to cut the Viet Minh supply lines, sinking any vessels they came upon.

On 30 May, in his moment of triumph, de Lattre's chief of staff brought him some devastating news. Bernard de Lattre, at the age of 23, had just been killed at Ninh Binh. He was told how his son was in his command post on a rocky outcrop with a French lieutenant and two corporals, one French and one Vietnamese, when mortar fire had rained directly down on them. All the occupants were killed or wounded. Out of some eighty marine commandos of the 3rd Naval Assault Division who also fought in defence of Ninh Binh, just nineteen survived.

De Lattre was beside himself with grief. He arranged for a Catholic mass for Bernard in Hanoi Cathedral. Two days later, he flew his son's body home to France, an act that attracted much criticism in the French media. He and his wife held a funeral service at the Invalides. Madame Simone de Lattre requested that the service be expanded to



Phat Diem cathedral. The town on the Day River was the target of a Viet Minh attack in May 1951.

honour the memory of all those killed in Indochina. Their beloved Bernard was buried at Mouilleron. Inevitably, the media attention on the event made the war even more unpopular in France.

When Field Marshal Montgomery heard the sad news, and despite their past differences, he wrote to offer his condolences. Notably though, Monty never recorded what he thought of de Lattre, making no reference to him in his memoirs. The grieving General de Lattre, with an active combat command, was under enormous pressure. His health was beginning to fail.

Meanwhile, General de Linarès was left to finish the destruction of the Viet Minh assaults across the Day River. By 10 June, Giap had to acknowledge that all was lost. Eight days later, the last of his units disengaged and retired back across the contested river. When the French infantry and tanks re-entered Phylu, the river banks were a devastated, smoking wasteland. Giap's forces suffered 11,000 casualties. He was now forced to revert to guerrilla warfare.

Ho and Giap were wrestling with some tough decisions when General Wei announced that Mao's attention was being diverted by the forthcoming Korean War. The Viet Minh had suffered three major defeats in the past five months, losing up to a third of their regular troops, along with much of the equipment furnished by the Chinese. It was clear that conventional attacks on French outposts were no longer paying off.

To the French, these victories seemed to offer hope that the Viet Minh could indeed be defeated. The French succeeded on the Day River because they successfully cut Giap's supply lines and because they had the support of the locals who were unsympathetic to the communists. His greatest error was overextending his forces, leaving himself without reserves. This led to some questioning Giap's competency.

It was Nguyen Binh, in charge of Viet Minh affairs in the south, operating from the swamps near Saigon, who was made the scapegoat. He was blamed for initiating the concept of the Red River Delta operation and for not backing the Viet Minh sufficiently. In disgrace, he was recalled to Viet Bac, but never made it. Nguyen Binh was later wounded in a skirmish with the French and allegedly finished off on the orders of Giap. The latter remained in command and reorganized his command structure. Giap and his officers had little option but to re-evaluate their strategy once again, and scale down their attacks.

Upon de Lattre's return from Paris, his first task was once more to try and suppress the countryside insurgency. In reality, he was fighting a losing battle in galvanizing the Vietnamese people and the government against the Viet Minh. Massing six battalions of troops, he conducted a sweep of an area near Hanoi on 18 June 1951. This operation took place in the most appalling weather. At least one major Viet Minh unit was able to slip through the net under cover of the wind and rain.

De Lattre sought to capitalize on local sympathy for his lost son, who was killed serving with a Vietnamese unit, and to ensure that his sacrifice did not go to waste. This gave him the opportunity to appeal to potential young recruits for the local Vietnamese army. To date, attracting peasant soldiers had not been difficult, but recruiting the educated was another matter. De Lattre despaired, because this was exactly the type of young Frenchman who was giving his life for Indochina. In contrast, Vietnamese students remained unmotivated by the war.

He visited a prestigious school where he made an impassioned speech. Before a packed audience, he told the boys that membership of the French Union did not nullify independence. Without France, their country would be dominated by Mao's China and the vengeful communists. He urged them to support Emperor Bao Dai and to fight and save their land, just as the peasant soldiers were doing. The emperor agreed to review a military parade, involving both French and Vietnamese troops. He also agreed to sign a decree officially placing Vietnam on a war footing.

In August, de Lattre took a month's leave, as he was increasingly unwell and privately despondent about his own future. Yet his remarkable drive and energy showed no signs of flagging, and the following month he visited America and Britain. During his American visit, he met President Harry S. Truman. De Lattre's preoccupation during these trips centred on what would happen, and in particular how would China react, once the Korean War came to an end. During his public appearances in America, and these were numerous, he was at pains to clarify that France's war was not colonial, but part of the broader struggle against the insidious spread of communism in Asia. He cautioned that a communist victory in Tonkin would be followed by the loss of Indochina, then Southeast Asia, with the region then posing an eventual threat to India and the Middle East.

While he may have been exaggerating the situation, he knew that France could not dispense with American political support and military aid. The latter was assured but, once again, there were no offers of combat troops. After his visit to London, he spent a few days in Paris attending an army reunion and seeing old comrades. He also gained an unwelcome diagnosis regarding his long-running hip problem that had been causing him such pain. De Lattre went to his wife and told her he had terminal cancer.

Despite this crushing news, de Lattre was as tireless as ever in garnering support for the war in Indochina. On his way back, he stopped in Rome in order to lobby the Vatican

to get the Roman Catholic Church in Vietnam, and its one and a half million followers, to put their full support behind opposing the Viet Minh. He landed back in Saigon on 19 October 1951, and was soon en route for Hanoi. He swiftly briefed the local Catholic Church on the Papacy's support for the war against communism in the region. Then with his son's death still heavily on his mind, he summoned Indochina's leading business figures. De Lattre told them that money should be raised so that all of France's troops, be they French, North or Black African, and Vietnamese, could enjoy Christmas.

General de Lattre, with time now running out, turned back to the battlefield with operations at Nghia Lo and Hoa Binh. While he had been away, Giap and his forces had been reasonably quiet as they were still licking their wounds. However, with the end of the rainy season, he wanted to draw the French north so that he could once again infiltrate the delta. The need to do this was urgent, as Giap's men were short of rice and were going hungry.

In early October, Giap struck at Nghia Lo, sited on a ridge between the Red and Black rivers with the 312th Division. General Salan could not abandon this as it would open up a route to Hanoi. Thanks to the French air force and two parachute-unit drops, the town was saved. The French paras then swept an area containing some 360 villages and over 250,000 people. Once more though, the Viet Minh proved elusive and slipped away.

De Lattre wanted to bring the enemy to battle at a location that they would have to defend. He chose their supply centre at the city of Hao Binh, which was to the southwest of Hanoi and outside the De Lattre Line. To the northwest lay a place called Dien Bien Phu. Hao Binh was an important transit point between China and Amman to the south. It was also the main town in the Muong region. These people had a tradition of loyalty to the French. The town lay on the Black River, so it could be a conduit for French waterborne reinforcements and supporting naval firepower. In addition, de Lattre hoped that the taking of Hoa Binh would be the first stage of cutting the Viet Minh in two by occupying their Thanh Hoa province bastion.

The operation was under the direction of Salan and de Linares. In the opening phase, the town of Cho Ben was attacked and secured to protect a flank. On 14 November, in a show of strength, 2,000 paras were dropped on Hoa Binh. They were followed by fifteen infantry battalions, seven artillery battalions, two armoured groups and two naval assault divisions. Giap, however, refused to give battle. He withdrew, in turn encircling the French. On the 19th, De Lattre said goodbye to the forces at Hoa Binh and handed his command over to Salan.

Officially, General de Lattre flew back to Paris for a meeting with the Grand Council of the French Union. Privately, the real reason was for major surgery on 18 December 1951. This was followed by another operation in the new year, but his condition quickly worsened. His reported last words, on 9 January, were, 'Where is Bernard?' Two days later he was dead.

A grateful France posthumously elevated de Lattre to Marshal of France. Among those who attended his funeral were de Gaulle, Eisenhower and Montgomery. After the service, a turretless armoured car took his coffin to Mouilleron. There he was laid to rest in a grave next to his beloved son, Bernard. De Lattre's legacy was he had shown the world that what had been perceived as a campaign of colonial repression was actually a Vietnamese civil war.



French troops with a captured Viet Minh fighter.

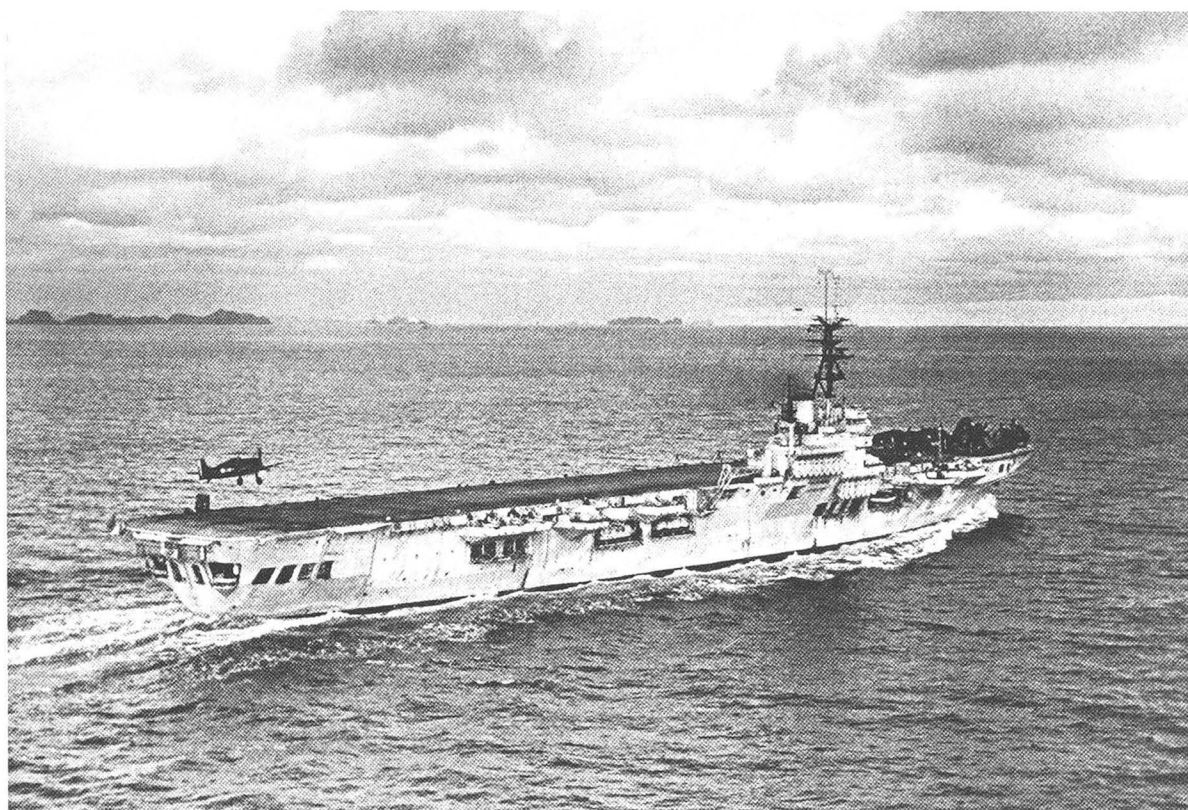
In Tonkin, fighting continued along the Black River during December 1951, with the Viet Minh slowly closing in on Hoa Binh. Salan committed three mobile groups and an airborne group, but the guerrillas withdrew once more, only to return in January 1952. They managed to cut the river, leaving Route 6 as the only way to resupply the garrison. When the Viet Minh tried to cut the road by attacking Xom Pheo, they had to contend with the 2nd Battalion of the Foreign Legion's 13th Demi-Brigade. The tough legionnaires resorted to repulsing them with a bayonet charge. It took a relief force eleven days to fight their way through to Hoa Binh. Reluctantly, Salan took the decision to evacuate rather than risk another encirclement. Under the codename 'Amaranth', this was successfully carried out between 22 and 24 February, under the cover of heavy artillery and air support.

10. AIR WAR OVER INDOCHINA

The air war over Indochina was a decidedly one-sided affair. The Viet Minh did not have the ability to operate an air force, especially one with modern jet fighters. Nor did Mao offer them one. This was just as well for the French, who relied on slower propeller-driven aircraft throughout the conflict. In Korea, Soviet and Chinese-piloted MiG-15 jets operated south of the Yalu, intercepting American B-29 bombers targeting North Korea's defence industries. This led to fierce aerial battles, though the communists ultimately failed to gain control of the air. The North Koreans were supplied the MiG, but they and their allies' jet fighters had little bearing on the ground war as they spent much of their time locked in dogfights.

In contrast, America was soon providing the French with Second World War-vintage naval dive-bombers to support their ground war in Indochina. However, France's greatest failing was its complete lack of a strategic airlift capability and the weakness of its tactical airlift. The French never really generated the ability to support more than one operation at a time, which was to have catastrophic results at Dien Bien Phu.

Once China and the Soviet Union had recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Viet Minh began to receive ever-growing quantities of Chinese and Soviet weapons.



A Grumman F6F Hellcat of Squadron 1F landing on the French carrier *Arromanches*, Gulf of Tonkin, 1953.

Subsequently, French reliance on fortified 'hedgehogs' meant aircraft played a key role in the escalating war, providing vital ground support and supplies. The French air force committed around 300 aircraft to Vietnam, while the French navy rotated four carriers with their naval air squadrons in the South China Sea.

Prior to the Second World War, the French Armée de l'Air (air force) and Aéronautique Navale or Aéronavale (naval air force) had maintained only token units in Indochina. Most of the aircraft there were obsolete, consisting of 1925-vintage biplanes. At the outbreak of the war in 1939, the French had about 100 aircraft, of which just 13 were modern fighters. These accounted for 20 Thai aircraft during the brief border war with Thailand, but they could do nothing to counter the powerful Japanese air force.

The French air force first returned to Saigon on 12 September 1945, when American-built Douglas C-47 Skytrains ferried in 150 French troops to serve alongside the British. Subsequently, C-47 and Toucan (Ju 52 variant) transports were used to drop rudimentary barrel bombs on Viet Minh positions. On their return to Indochina, until 1949, the French feared that America might impose an embargo on spares for U.S.-made combat aircraft and thus greatly limit their deployment options. This concern, however, evaporated once Mao had taken over in China.

Ironically, the Nazi war machine helped equip the French armed forces. The trimotor Toucan was a hangover from the Second World War. While under Nazi occupation, France had been forced to build the German Junkers Ju 52 medium bomber and transport aircraft. These were constructed at the Amiot factory at Colombes. Post-war designated the AAC.1 Toucan, it was kept in production with over 400 built for Air France and the French air force. The drawback with the Toucan, and indeed the Skytrain, was the limited number of men they could carry: eighteen and twenty-eight respectively. This meant that

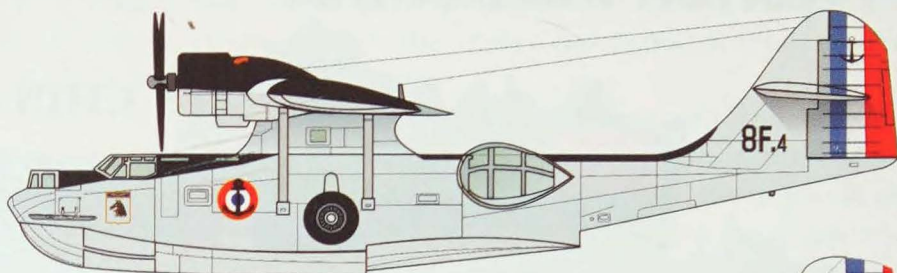


American-supplied F8F-1 Bearcat fighter-bombers first arrived in Indochina in January 1951. The airfield here is probably Tourane.

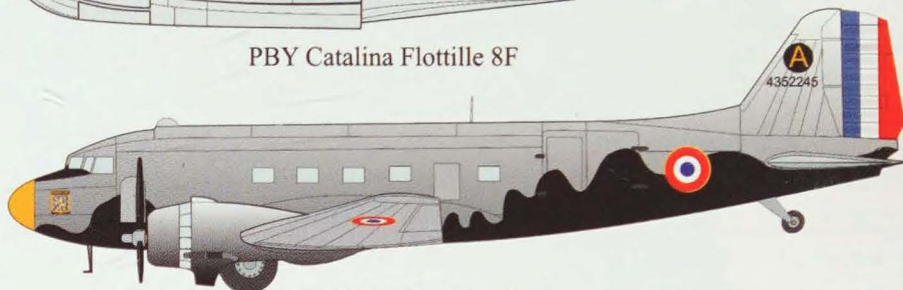


Indo China Map

AIRCRAFT USED BY THE FRENCH FORCES



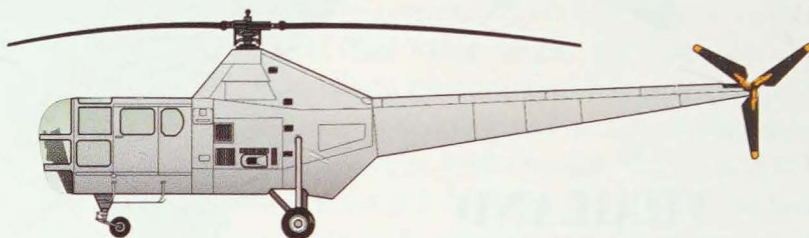
PBY Catalina Flottille 8F



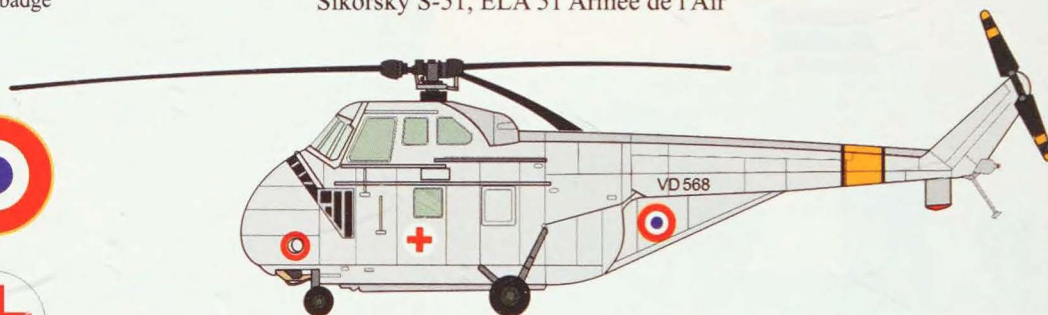
C-47 Sqn Franche-Comte



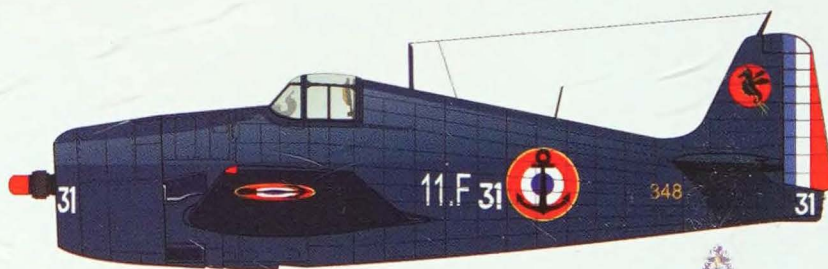
Pilot's badge



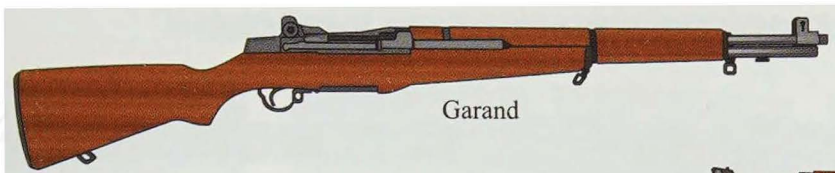
Sikorsky S-51, ELA 51 Armee de l'Air



Sikorsky S-55 Armee de l'Air EMA 2-65, Laos c. 1954



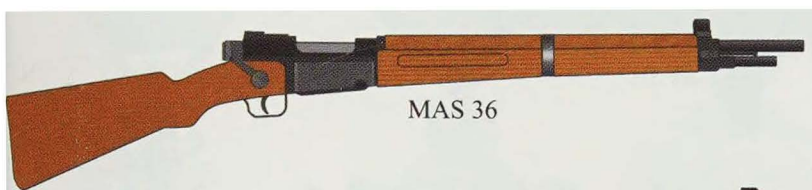
Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat of Flotille II Aeronavale Indochina 1945



Garand



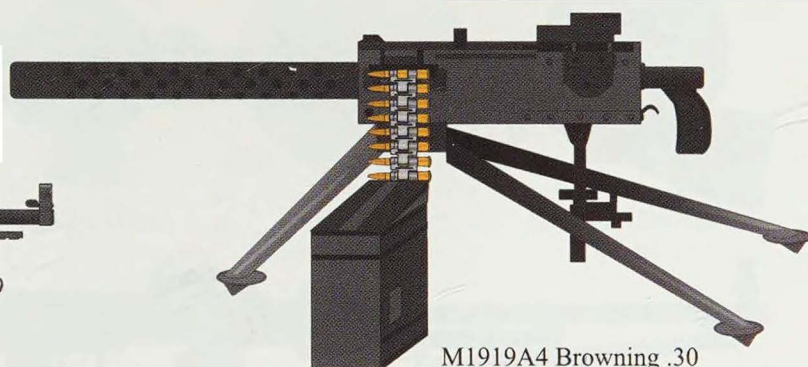
M1 carbine



MAS 36



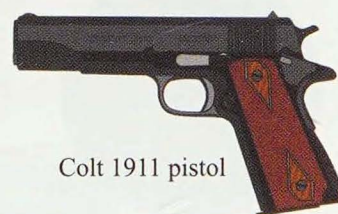
MAT 49



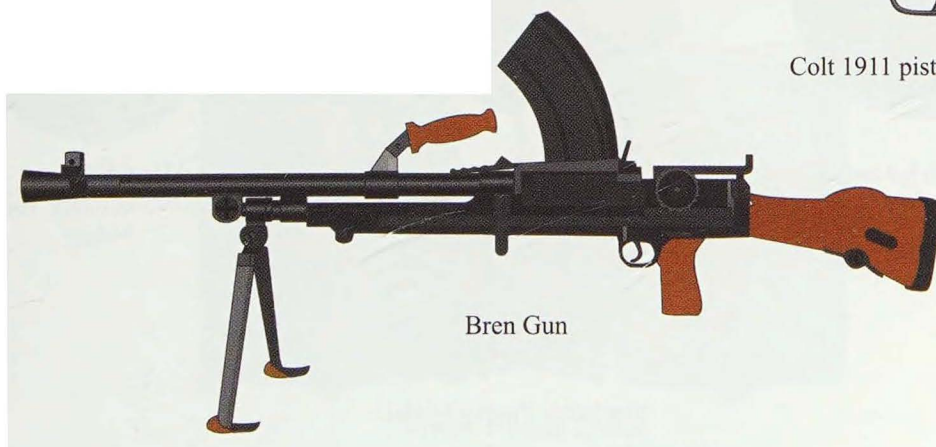
M1919A4 Browning .30



Chatellerault 7.5mm



Colt 1911 pistol



Bren Gun

WEAPONS AND INSIGNIA OF THE VIET MINH



Mosin Nagant



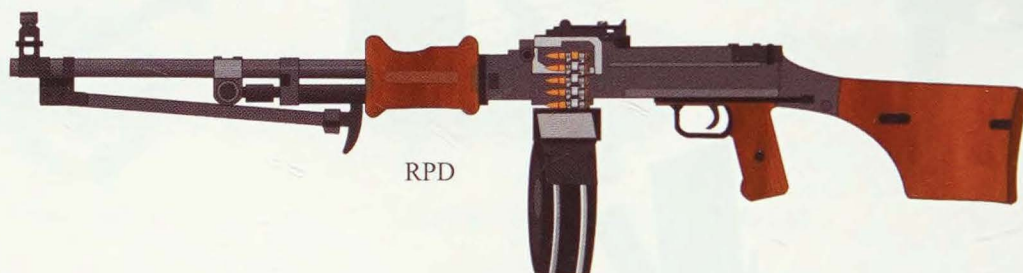
PPSH



SKS



7.62 x 39mm round



RPD



Viet Minh hat badge



Viet Minh Victory Medal



Ho Chi Minh
People's Revolutionary Youth Union
badge

MEDALS AND INSIGNIA OF THE FRENCH FORCES



Medaille Militaire

Combatant's Cross

Indo China
Service Medal

Overseas Service
Medal



French Foreign Legion paratrooper badges



French Foreign Legion
Second Infantry Regiment pocket badges



*Left: Vo Nguyen Giap, 2008.
(Photo Ricardo Stuckert)*

*Below: The 37 mm M1939 (61-K)
anti-aircraft gun reputedly used by
the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu to
shoot down three French aircraft.
(Photo Binh Giang)*





Statue to the Viet Minh
who fought the French.
(Photo Cookie Nguyen)



Independence statue,
Hanoi. (Photo Pilip)



French 105mm captured by the Viet Minh, 1948. (Photo Bui Thuy Dao Nguyen)

parachute and air-landing operations required very large numbers of transport aircraft. In the Second World War, the Axis and Allies conducted such operations, but they always resulted in considerable losses in aircraft.

Similarly, occupied France built the German Fieseler Fi 156 Storch (Stork) reconnaissance aircraft, made famous by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. It was also kept in post-war production as the Morane-Saulnier Criquet (Cricket). This proved ideal for Indochina because of its short take-off and landing capabilities, plus its low speed, which enabled it to use the roughest of air strips. The Criquet was deployed in Indochina by the French army, Armée de l'Air and Aéronavale for a wide variety of tasks.

The first fighter aircraft sent out were British-supplied Supermarine Spitfires, rather than the Armée de l'Air's American-built Republic P-47Ds. While waiting for them, French pilots conducted hair-raising training flights in a dozen dilapidated and untrustworthy Japanese fighters. The Spitfires though, were not suitable for ground support due to their limited range and small bomb load. Nonetheless, they were flown from Saigon in Cochinchina, Nha Trang and Tourane (Da Nang) in Annam and Hanoi, and Lang Son in Tonkin until 1947. Likewise, the British-supplied, twin-engine de Havilland Mosquito proved ill-suited to the conditions, as the bonded-plywood structure had a habit of falling apart in the tropical heat. Confined to Saigon, they were eventually sent home.

To back up the Armée de l'Air the French navy sought to keep a carrier stationed off the coast of Vietnam, though these deployments really stretched its capabilities, operating so far from home. The escort carrier *Dixmude* (former HMS *Biter*) first arrived in the South China Sea in March 1947, with nine American-supplied Douglas SBD-5 Dauntless dive-bombers – the victors of the Battle of Midway in June 1942. These aircraft made their first carrier sorties on the 16th of that month, with additional raids against targets in Annam and Tonkin.

After problems with her launch catapult, *Dixmude* was forced to return to Toulon for repairs, thereafter making only one more combat deployment the following year. On the return journey, the vessel carried Toucans and Spitfires for the air force. The elderly carrier was then employed as an aircraft-transport vessel. *Dixmude* was photographed in 1950 on the Saigon River with a deck full of F6F-5 Hellcats.

The light carrier *Arromanches* (former HMS *Colossus*) arrived in November 1948, making a total of four combat deployments up to and including 1954. This carrier operated the American Curtiss SB2C-5 Helldiver dive-bomber. While it provided accurate and powerful support for the French ground forces, the Helldiver was vulnerable to ground fire. During these deployments, the aircraft usually operated from forward land bases rather than from the carrier.

The third carrier committed to the war was *La Fayette* (former USS *Langley*), which took over in April 1953, minus its aircraft, ready to take on those from the *Arromanches*. It only stayed on station for five weeks.

The fourth and final carrier, *Bois Belleau* (former USS *Belleau Wood*), only operated from 30 April to 15 September 1954. The navy also deployed amphibious aircraft, such as the PB4Y Catalina, to patrol Vietnam's coastal waters and the Red River Delta. Additionally, they acted in air-support, transport and medical-evacuation roles. These were replaced by the four-engine PB4Y Privateer, which was the largest aircraft operated by the French.

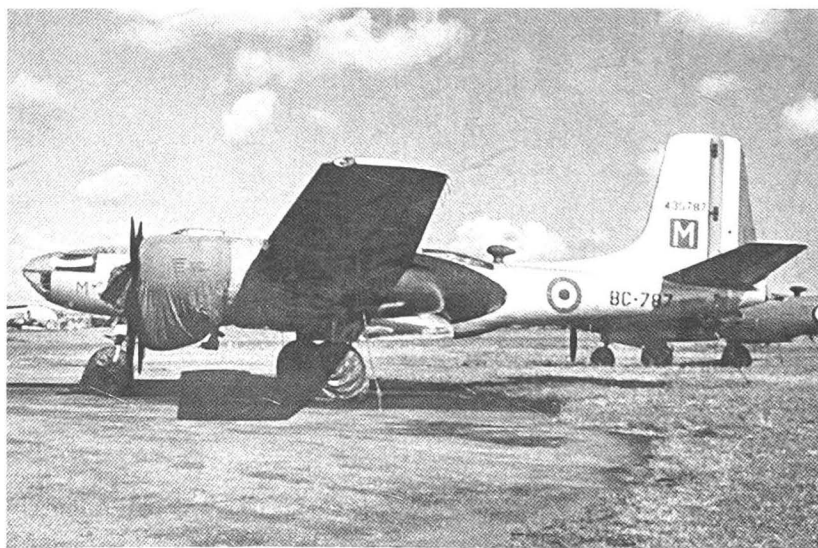
Once Mao was in power and the Korean War had broken out, Washington saw France less as an unsavoury colonial power with dubious democratic credentials, and more as a staunch anti-communist ally. The Spitfires were soon followed with American-supplied Bell P-63 Kingcobras, called 'Kings' by their French aircrews. These helped cover the ill-fated withdrawal from Cao Bang in the summer of 1950, but again, could not carry a large enough bombload and could not operate from forward airfields.

What arrived next was much better and just what the French needed. To re-equip French fighter units, the Americans provided the F6F-5 Hellcat and the F8F-1 Bearcat. Both these were designed as carrier strike aircraft, so were capable of relatively short take-off and landing. This meant that they were ideal for forward deployment in Indochina. The Hellcats were delivered by U.S. carrier in November 1950 with the 'Beercats' as the French called them, following in January 1951.

The Hellcat was only intended as an interim solution until all the fighter squadrons could be equipped with the Bearcat – this conversion though, was not completed until early 1953. In contrast, the Bearcat remained in service until the final French withdrawal in April 1956, and fought at Dien Bien Phu. It became the premier fighter-bomber in Indochina, being used almost solely for ground-attack missions. Some 'Beercats' though, were converted to a reconnaissance role by fitting specially modified U.S. drop tanks fitted with two cameras.

In the French armoury was napalm. This jellied-petroleum bomb, developed by the Americans in the early 1940s, and used against the Japanese during the Second World War, was then employed by UN forces in Korea. This terrible weapon, which bursts on contact with the ground into a wide carpet of flame, generates enormous heat and, once stuck to skin, cannot be removed. Used as an anti-personnel weapon, it was devastating. The Bearcat was capable of dropping 100gal. napalm tanks. It was first used by the French on 22 December 1950, against a Viet Minh troop concentration at Tien Yen.

The French air force desperately wanted a twin-engine light bomber, but none was available. It especially needed such an aircraft once the Viet Minh's air defences began to improve. The best available aircraft to fill this role was the American Douglas B-26 Invader, which was known as the A-26 until 1948. While the Bearcat and Hellcat were



A Douglas B-26 Invader light bomber loaned by the U.S. to the French air force in Indochina. (Photo National U.S. Navy Museum)



An American B-26C invader dropping bombs over Korea in 1951. The French were first supplied this type of bomber three years earlier. (Photo USAF)

surplus to U.S. Navy requirements, the USAF was employing its B-26 as night bombers in Korea. Nonetheless, the first four aircraft were supplied to the French in early November 1950.

The B-26 was the most potent type of air power the French were able to bring to bear during the war, with the ability to carry 2,722kg of bombs, napalm or rockets, and armed with up to fourteen machine guns. Equipping a French bomb group, the B-26s were operated from Tourane. A further two bomb groups were later formed using this aircraft. Despite its growing strength and newfound confidence, the French air force was unable to provide the army with a decisive edge during the inconclusive Black River offensive in the winter of 1951–52. From then until the end of the war, America provided some eighty bombers, fighter-bombers and transport aircraft. Many of these, however, arrived too late to influence the outcome of the war.

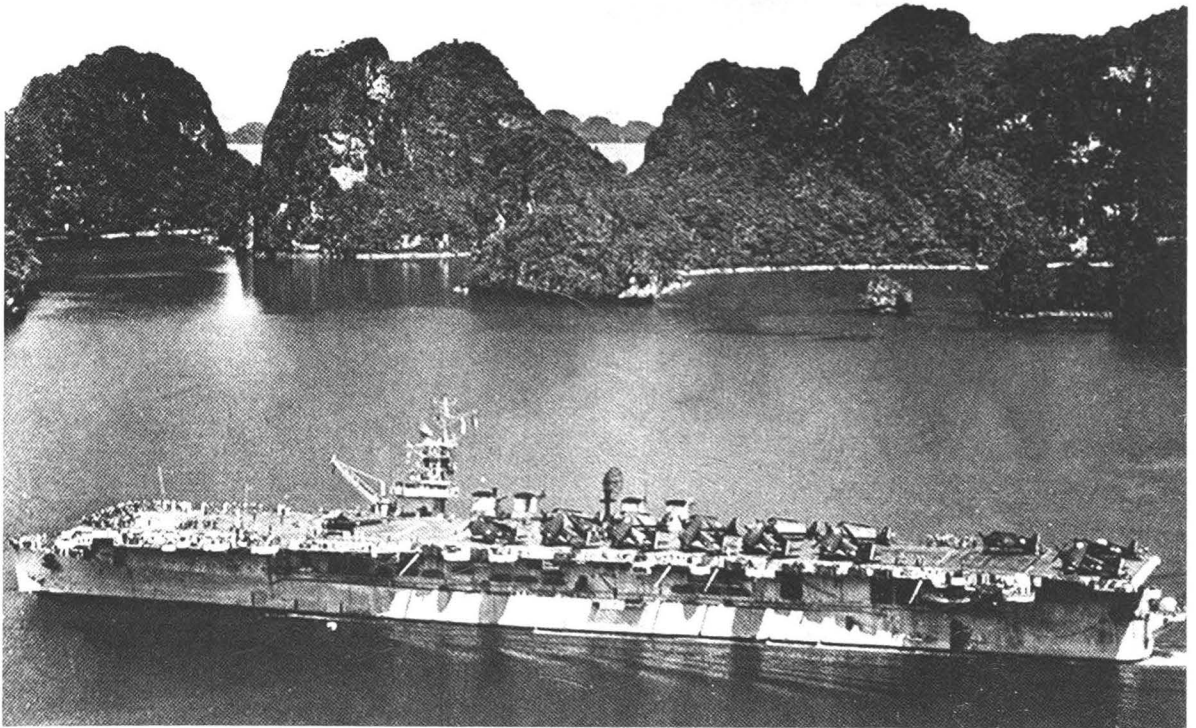
Funds were not made available for the acquisition of limited numbers of helicopters from Britain until 1952. America also supplied some rotary-wing aircraft. The French army, air force and navy all deployed helicopters to support their operations. The Groupement des Formations d'Hélicoptères of the French army was created under Commandant Marceau Crespin. In honour of General de Lattre's late son, who was killed in action, the French army's main helipad at Tan Son Nhut air base outside Saigon was named Camp Bernard de Lattre. Army helicopter squadrons were also based at Bien Hoa to the north of Saigon. These were used almost entirely for medical evacuation rather than troop carrying. By the time of Dien Bien Phu, the French had just thirty-two helicopters, most of which were Sikorski S-55s, dubbed the H-19 by the French.

Dien Bien Phu

General Salan, relying on the strategy of *les hérissons* fortified 'hedgehog' bases and mobile commando operations, needed the commitment of massive airpower. By this stage, the air force had some 300 aircraft, including four groups of Bearcats and two of Invaders. This strength was to remain unchanged until after Dien Bien Phu, when the third bomb group was added.

After the withdrawal of the antiquated Toucans, there were three transport groups equipped with C-47s, providing logistical support for the ground troops. To supplement this insufficient fleet, the French made use of commercial- and American-supplied Fairchild C-119Cs, which were sent from Japan and Korea. Some aircraft were flown by American mercenaries, operating from Formosa. These civilian pilots could earn up to five times that of their counterparts in the Armée de l'Air. The French armed forces' lack of a strategic airlift meant that to fly troops and equipment from France or the other colonies required the help of Air France. America also stepped in, transporting almost 1,000 military personnel from Paris to Saigon in April–May 1954.

By 1953, the key Armée de l'Air officers were General Charles Lauzin, commander of the French air force in Indochina, General Jean Dechaux, commander Tactical Air Group North (Tonkin), and Colonel Jean-Louis Nicot, commanding the air transport group. Army aviation came under Commandant Crespin, who was responsible for the limited helicopter units.



The French aircraft carrier *La Fayette* in Indochina waters, 1953. (Photo U.S. Navy)

11. OPERATION LORRAINE

For the next seven months following the Black River battles, the French largely remained in their strongholds and the fighting was sporadic. The mobile groups bravely ventured forth to keep the supply lines open, but the area under French control gradually shrank. Their only notable success occurred in central Annam with Operation Sauterelle, conducted on the coast above the Perfume River and Hue. This, and a subsequent operation, accounted for 3,000 Viet Minh killed or captured.

Giap waited for the monsoon to end, as he was planning to take the French positions on the Nghia Lo ridge. This operation was to be a repeat of the Cao Bang-Lang Son disaster of 1950. Giap gathered his 308th, 312th and 316th divisions, with the intention of launching simultaneous attacks on the towns of Nghia Lo, Gia Hoi and Van Yen. In mid-October 1952, Nghia Lo was overrun by human-wave attacks of the Viet Minh 308th Division. The Viet Minh triumphantly photographed a group of eight, apprehensive-looking French officers who were captured during the fighting.

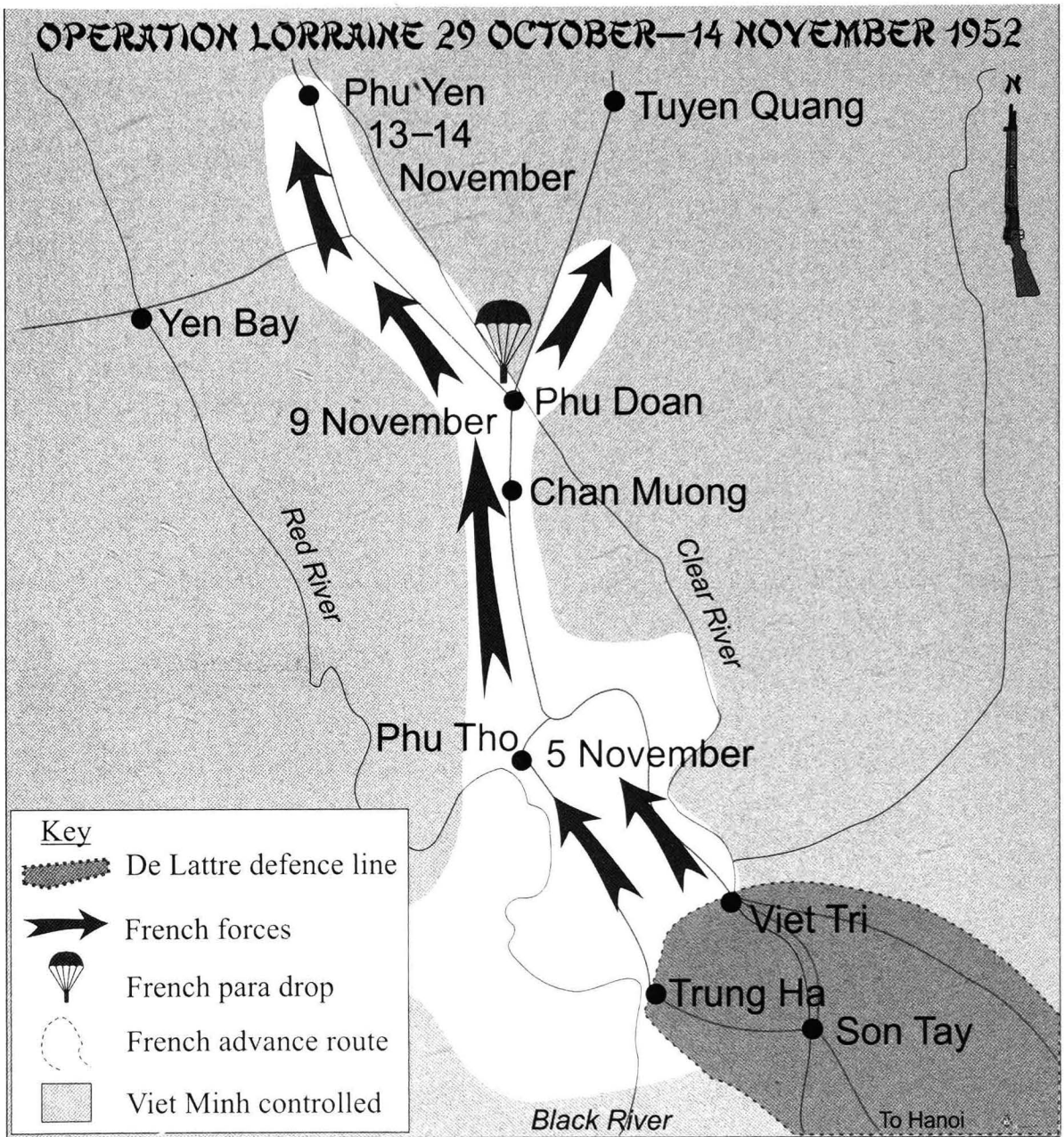
It was clear, with the loss of Nghia Lo, that it would be impossible to hold the other forts in the T'ai Hills. This led to the evacuation of the remaining French outposts and again paratroops were sacrificed to cover the retreat toward the Black River defences.

Under Major Marcel Bigeard, the 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion was dropped to reinforce the post at Tu Le. They were to protect the withdrawal of the 1st T'ai Mountain Battalion, 17th Moroccan Tabor and 3rd Battalion, 1st Moroccan Rifles. The paras were attacked on 20 October 1952, forcing them to conduct a fighting retreat towards the Black River. They ran into an ambush set by the 312th Division. Two days later, the paras, having lost 60 per cent of their strength, reached their destination.

The French defences covering the vulnerable Laotian border were now stretched extremely thin. General Salan knew that the defensive line would not hold in the face of a concerted communist attack. Initially, he had assumed that Giap's attacks were a feint, and that he would turn and strike at the delta once more. Instead, Giap headed southwest. Salan planned to intercept him by moving northwest to block the communists, and force them away from the Black River toward the delta and into open battle. He chose as his area of attack the line of the Clear River northwest of Hanoi.

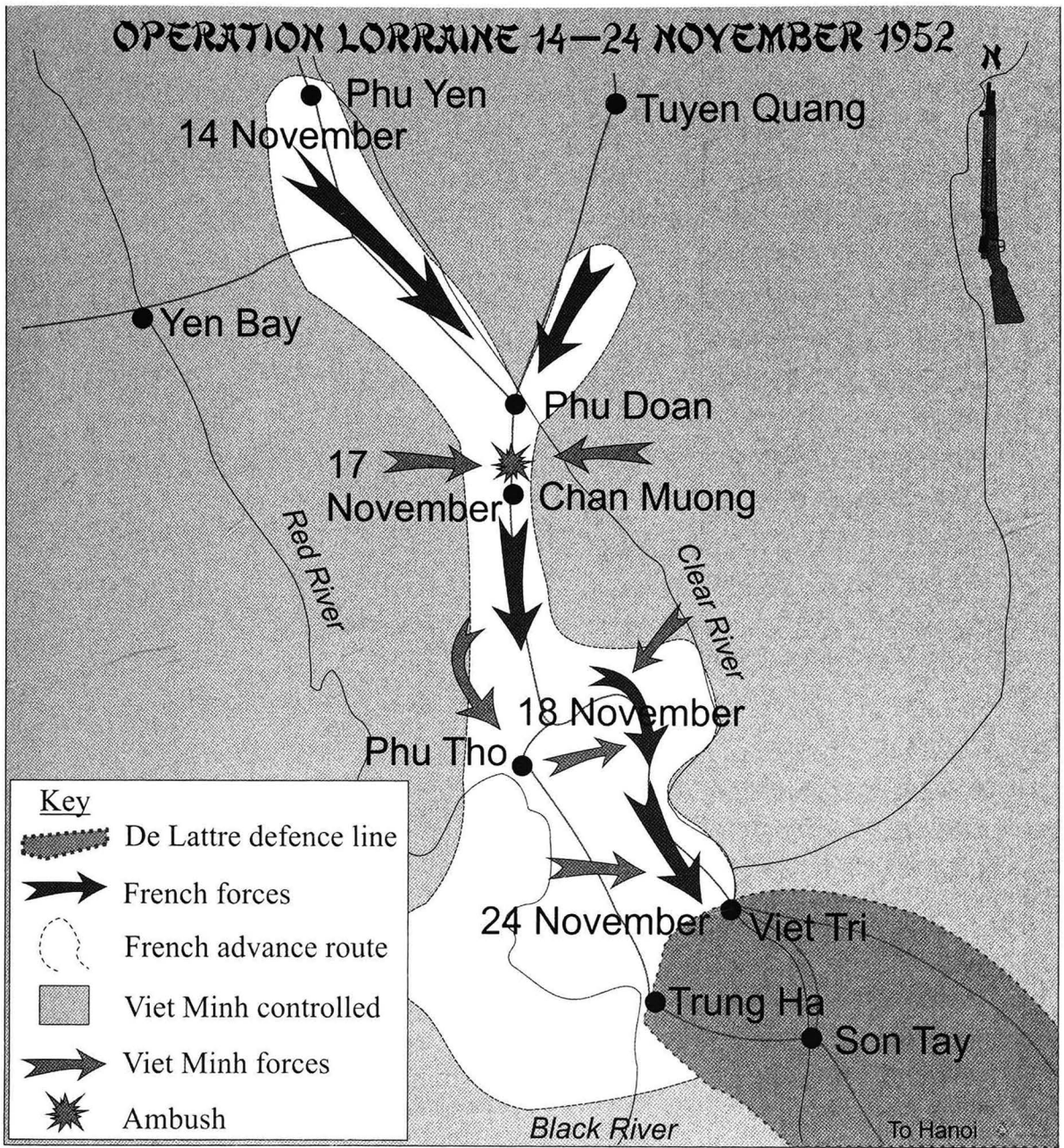
Dubbed Operation Lorraine, this was to involve the largest French force to date, some 30,000 men. This consisted of four mobile groups, a paratroop group, and supporting units of armour, artillery and engineers. Their task was to seize the Viet Minh supply depots at Phu Doan, Yen Bay and Tuyen Quang, nearly 160km outside the delta defences and deep inside enemy territory. Giap, however, had good intelligence and knew exactly what the French were intending. Nevertheless, he persisted with his push into the T'ai country. As far as he was concerned, his enemies were simply putting their necks in the noose. To delay the French and act as a blocking force, Giap deployed the 36th and 176th regiments.

Lorraine was designed to be executed in four stages. Opening on 29 October 1952, the first would establish a bridgehead towards Pho Tho, 32km to the north, with a task force from Trun Ha on the Red River northwest of Son Tay. In the second, another task force, heading north along Route Coloniale 2 from Viet Tri to the north of Son Tay, would link



up at Phu Tho and expand the bridgehead. These two groups would then fight their way further north through Chang Muong towards Phu Doan, where a parachute jump by Airborne Group 1 would meet up with them. Also, forces would push up the Red River to prevent the Viet Minh from escaping westwards. The third stage would involve the destruction of the enemy supply dumps in the Phu Doan area as well as engaging enemy fighters. The fourth, and rather optimistic phase, would be the exploitation of the captured land corridor between the Red and Clear rivers.

Three Red River bridgeheads were secured by 4 November 1952 and mobile groups 1 and 4 headed towards Route Coloniale 2. Delaying actions by Viet Minh regional troops meant that the link-up did not occur until the following day. However, the lack of opposition from regular Viet Minh divisions encouraged the French to press on.



Early on 9 November, the combined task forces, with armoured cars and tanks in the lead, pushed up Route Coloniale 2. In the meantime, the 3rd Dinassaut sailed up the river towards the drop zone. By mid-afternoon, 2,350 paras, belonging to the 1st and 2nd Foreign Legion parachute battalions and the 3rd Colonial Parachute Battalion, had successfully landed in the Phu Doan area where they rendezvoused with the naval force.

Resistance at Phu Doan was light, and with the arrival of the mobile groups, French forces confirmed the village was indeed a major Viet Minh supply depot. They captured a large quantity of supplies, including heavy weaponry such as anti-aircraft guns and mortars. To the embarrassment of French intelligence, they also discovered quantities of Soviet-supplied Molotava trucks. These were being used to move supplies to Viet Minh field units. The French then sent patrols west to Yen Bay on the Red River and to Tuyen Quang to the northeast.

At this stage, Salan should have withdrawn, but instead he opted to conduct stage four of Operation Lorraine, possibly still hoping to force Giap to commit. Salan had successfully captured valuable enemy supplies, but the absence of the Viet Minh's main force meant that his units were now stretched out along a vulnerable and ultimately useless strip of land, well outside the relative safety of the delta defences. The French now moved to extend this corridor by pushing on to Phu Yen, well north of Phu Doan.

Giap, rather than counterattack to retake Phu Doan, was content to wait it out. He instructed the majority of his three regular divisions to remain on the Black River. Just two regiments were sent toward Yen Bay. Giap also moved to pressure Salan to withdraw by authorizing the 304th and 320th divisions, to the north and south of the delta, to conduct guerrilla attacks to distract the French.

By 14 November 1952, Salan's tanks and infantry had reached Phu Yen. It was at this point that Salan, realizing he was dangerously exposed, ordered the withdrawal. Three days later, they had reached Phu Doan without mishap. By now though, two of Giap's regular regiments had reached the midway point between the village and Phu Tho, thereby blocking the French retreat. They were deployed south of the village of Chan Muong in the Chan Muong gorge. This was a steep-sided, jungle-covered defile, through which Route Coloniale 2 passed. It was ideal for an ambush.

Men of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment, the 4th Battalion, 7th Algerian Rifles, and of the Bataillon de Marche Indochinois (a mixed French, Cambodian and Vietnamese unit) drove straight into the trap that was initiated by mortar bombs raining down on them. The French, although suffering heavy casualties in the following enemy infantry assault, quickly rallied and counterattacked. The Viet Minh were expelled from the gorge and the Chan Muong Valley, but the French lost 56 dead, 125 wounded and 133 missing. It was not a good start.

This set the pattern for the next week, as the French struggled to escape south to the safety of the De Lattre Line. The route to Phu Tho was blocked, however, so they turned east and then south toward Viet Tri. The Viet Minh counterattacked again on 18, 20 and 24 November, inflicting yet more casualties.

The French had completely withdrawn all their Operation Lorraine forces back across the Red River by 1 December, having lost 1,200 men. Despite the disruption of Giap's supply lines, Operation Lorraine could be seen as nothing but a complete and costly failure.

This victory, however, made Giap overconfident when he turned his attention back to French strongholds in the Black River valley. Looking at his maps, he decided to attack the isolated French base at Na San. He was partly emboldened by the French failure to adequately supply Operation Lorraine from the air. His diversionary attacks, and the need to sustain the outlying garrisons, had ensured that Lorraine was beyond the French air force's capabilities.

While Operation Lorraine was underway, Colonel Jean Gilles was tasked with building a fire-support base in the Na San valley in Son La Province, to the west of the Black River. This was on Route Provinciale 41, which ran from Hanoi, across the river at Hoa Binh, through the town of Son La, and north to the French stronghold at Lai Chau. It was to be a fully fortified *aéro-terrestre* (air-land) base. The intention was, once again, to draw Giap



Vo Nguyen Giap inspecting Viet Minh during August Revolution celebrations, 1945.

into open battle with a very sizeable entrenched French force, backed by aircraft, artillery and mortars.

In October 1952, the valley, surrounded by hills, hosted a single French outpost and a small airstrip. By the end of November, thanks to the efforts of the French air force, Na San had a garrison of some 15,000 men. Gilles employed the *le hérisson* (hedgehog) tactic. His defences consisted of thirty *point d'appui* (armed positions) that formed an outer and inner ring surrounding the airfield and headquarters, offering mutually supporting fields of fire. Each had good all-round defence, strengthened by trenches, sandbags, barbed wire and mines.

Gilles multi-national forces comprised three battle groups that included Algerian, Moroccan, T'ai and Vietnamese troops, as well as Foreign Legion infantry and paras. They were able to call on dive-bombers from the French navy and bombers from the air force. Artillery included 105mm howitzers and 81mm mortars. This ensured that Na San packed a powerful punch.

Just as Salan had hoped, Giap was provoked into attacking the base using his 308th, 312th and 316th divisions. Giap appreciated that French air power necessitated night attacks, but he knew that if his men could take the airfield then the base would be cut off and helpless. His assault opened at 8.00 pm on 23 November 1952, when a regiment from Colonel Vuong Thua Tu's 308th Division unsuccessfully attempted to take *point d'appui* 8 that formed part of the inner ring. They tried twice, but on each occasion, they were driven back. Then, until the end of the month, Giap conducted night attacks, probing French defences, looking for weak spots.

At 8.00 pm on 30 November, nine Viet Minh battalions attempted to storm positions 22bis and 24 in the outer ring, which lay either side of the main French headquarters.

The latter position, on the west bank of the Black River, held on for three hours before surrendering. The 225 men of the 2nd T'ai Battalion holding 22*bis* endured nine hours of attacks before they were overrun. Barely a squad managed to find their way back to the airfield.

The following day, Gilles fought to retake both these lost positions, utilizing the massed fire power available to him, which included a total of six artillery batteries. After an opening barrage, Foreign Legion paratroops secured 22*bis*. It took the 3rd Colonial Airborne Battalion seven hours of tough fighting to retake 24. That night, Giap launched an all-out attack on a number of positions, with 21*bis* and the large defensive-position 26, again in the outer ring, bearing the brunt of the assaults. The Viet Minh's human waves were greeted with flares, bombs, napalm and shells.

The attacks suddenly stopped mid-morning on 2 December. Two days later, Giap, having sustained almost 3,500 casualties, withdrew his battered divisions. Despite suffering about 500 casualties, the French were convinced that their fortified base *aéro-terrestre* and *le hérisson* was a war-winning formula. In the case of Na Son, it was heavily reinforced and kept resupplied entirely by air. As a consequence, it was not overrun and held out, while inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. The net result of this though, was it convinced French planners that they could keep isolated 'air-heads' resupplied from the air – this optimism was to have disastrous results at Dien Bien Phu.

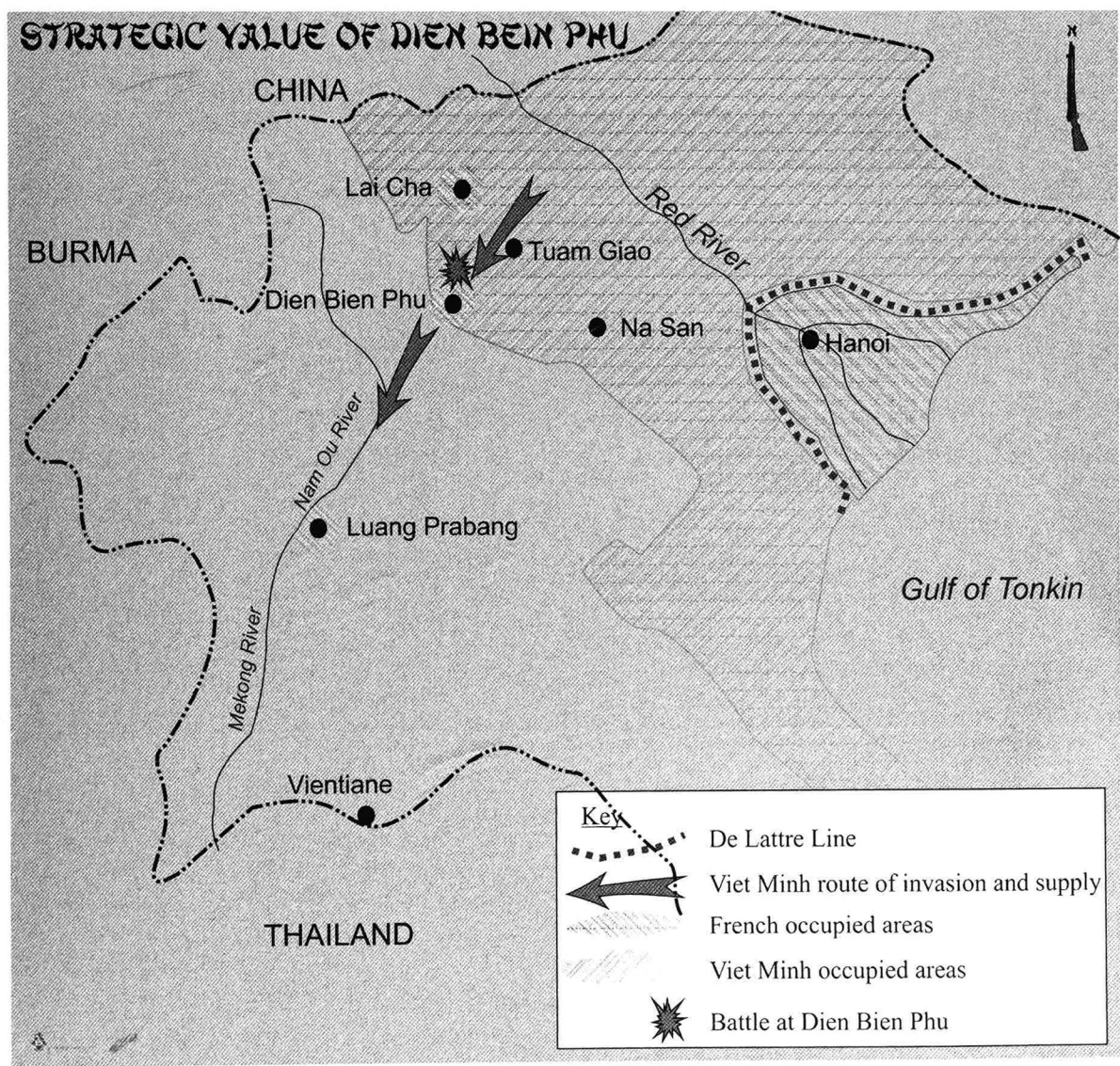


French hearts and minds efforts were never successful.

12. PRELUDE TO DEFEAT

In April 1953, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap sought to stretch the French Expeditionary Force in Tonkin even more, by spreading the conflict into northern Laos. The invasion by the 312th Division had two other goals: the capture of the valuable opium crop and joining forces with the neighbouring communist Pathet Lao guerrillas. Their route of attack ran from Tuam Giao, through Dien Bien Phu, over the border, and down the Nam Ou valley.

General Salan simply did not have any reserves available to reinforce Laos, so the French outposts there were instructed to hold on for as long as they could, while a sustainable defensive system was set up in the region. French resistance was on a line running north-south, centred on Moung Khoua, Luang Prabang, and on the Plaine des Jarres. The town of



Luang Prabang in central northern Laos was particularly important as it sits on the junction of the Mekong and Nam Ou (not to be confused with Nam Oum) rivers.

Giap's invasion of Laos was a very significant turning point in the war. Previously, the French had been able to largely confine the conflict to Tonkin, with them operating from Hanoi behind the security of the De Lattre Line. Now the *le hérisson* defence would have to be extended around Luang Prabang. It was a step too far.

Although the French Expeditionary Force by this stage in the war numbered 190,000 and the Vietnamese National Army was being formed, Salan had no troops to spare. In northern Vietnam alone he had 80,000 men holding 900 forts who were tied down by fewer than 30,000 Viet Minh, most of whom were peasant militia rather than regulars. This was the situation facing General Henri Navarre when he arrived in May 1953 to replace Salan.

Navarre realized that his immediate problems were much closer to home, so he and his staff set about formulating the so-called Navarre Plan. In southern Vietnam, the troublesome guerrilla war was containable and stable. In the north, the lack of reserves meant that he had nothing with which to counter any Viet Minh attacks in the Red River Delta. His only option was to withdraw some of the outlying garrisons so as to free up troops from static defence. He would eventually be able to muster some 30,000 mobile reserves, but that would take time, so he decided to sit out the 1953–54 campaigning season while developing the Vietnamese National Army. Once the Vietnamese were up to strength they could replace the French and French-led garrison forces in the delta. Washington agreed to support his plans with almost \$400 million worth of military assistance. He determined to conduct a number of minor operations to keep Giap occupied before launching a decisive offensive in 1955.

After the departure of de Lattre, René Cogny, who had been on his staff, took a combat command, leading a division in Tonkin and a mobile group in the Red River Delta. Navarre now appointed him ground-forces commander in northern Vietnam. Both men were to subsequently fall out spectacularly over the handling of the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

In the meantime, in Peking, Mao and his advisers decided that they would settle, as they had in Korea, for a half measure in Indochina. By 1953, both sides in Korea, the North backed by China and the South with its United Nations allies, had fought themselves to a bloody standstill, leaving the country divided exactly as it had been before the conflict. The Chinese People's Liberation Army, employing human-wave tactics, had suffered the most appalling casualties. Mao, during the Korean War, had called a halt to large-scale operations in Indochina so that China could focus her resources on Korea. When he took the decision to end the Korean conflict in May 1953, Mao immediately despatched Chinese officers directly from Korea to Indochina.

Mao was looking at the bigger picture: Ho must do enough to drive the French out, but not spark intervention by America. After China's experiences in Korea, Mao was only too aware of the type of firepower the American military could bring to bear. Mao wanted a settlement in Indochina, even if it meant partition, but he did not tell the Viet Minh. He wanted them to escalate the war to a point where it created an irretrievable crisis for the French, but no more.

In July 1953, in northeastern Tonkin, Navarre attacked guerrilla bases in the Lang Son area with Operation Hirondelle, using three parachute battalions. These were then

evacuated by sea. He also acted to secure his lines of communication in central Vietnam along the main north–south Route Coloniale 1. Despite a French operation the previous year, convoys on this road were regularly attacked by the Viet Minh's 95th Regiment operating from a fortified region in the sand dunes and salt marshes between Quang Tri to the north and Hue to the south. This had led to the French dubbing the road *la rue sans joie* – the street without joy.

Under General Leblanc, the French gathered some 10,000 men for Operation Camargue, a combined ground, airborne and amphibious operation that was intended to trap the Viet Minh. The 3rd Amphibious Group deployed 160 tracked Crabs and Alligators to get their men ashore and into the dunes. Camargue commenced on 27 July 1953, the landings unopposed. The first resistance was met at Dong Que when the 6th Moroccan Spahis with M24 tanks, the 1st Battalion Moroccan Rifles and the 69th African Artillery Regiment were ambushed. They managed to destroy almost an entire Viet Minh company, but this delay enabled the rest of the 95th Regiment to retreat into the southern portion of the developing pocket.

At 10.45 am, to block the Viet Minh's retreat, elements of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Light Infantry Regiment, were dropped near Dai Loc, from where they began to push towards the mouth of the Van Trinh Canal to close the pocket. Despite hazardous drop conditions caused by 48kph winds, the 3rd Vietnamese Parachute Battalion dropped near Lang Bao. This helped seal the southern escape routes. However, during the night of 28–29 July, most of the Viet Minh managed to slip the net. The ambitious operation was ended on 4 August, having been a modest success.

General Salan
and Prince
Sisavang
Vatthana visiting
the strategic
Laotian town of
Luang Prabang,
May 1953.



During August, as part of Navarre's reduction in exposed garrisons, Na San was evacuated. French air force transport aircraft were assisted by planes from three civilian companies in an effort to complete this mission as quickly as possible. Colonel Gilles conducted the withdrawal without loss, having duped the local Viet Minh. He slowly withdrew his units, collapsing his defences, until just a single battalion was left. A local Viet Minh officer at Na San recalled, 'The enemy was able to escape and save its entire forces because of our poor intelligence.'

Nonetheless, it must have slightly rankled Gilles that having shed so much blood to secure the base, he was now asked to abandon it to the enemy.

That October, Mao got his hands-on France's strategic intentions, when he obtained a copy of the Navarre Plan. China's chief military adviser to Indochina, General Wei Guo-qing, flew from Beijing, handing this to Ho Chi Minh in person. It was this intelligence that convinced Ho to give battle at Dien Bien Phu, although the plan made no mention of the place. It is unclear how this vital intelligence coup occurred, but a copy of the Navarre Plan had been passed to the Americans.

By November 1953, the French position in Indochina had slightly improved, and Navarre began contemplating taking the battle to Giap once more. Disrupting Giap's supply lines seemed the best option, as this would curtail the Viet Minh's war effort. This, however, would require a mission deep into the Viet Bac and, in view of the failure of Operation Lorraine, was not an enticing prospect. Countering Giap's unwelcome activities in Laos seemed to offer a better chance of success, especially if the Na San base *aéro-terrestre* could be repeated to good effect.

Looking at his situation maps, Navarre understood that if his men could dominate the invasion routes into Laos, this would cut off the Viet Minh threatening Luang Prabang. This would either force Giap to fight or withdraw. The best place to block Giap was at Dien Bien Phu, known as Muong Than in T'ai, and the flat valley formed by the Nam Youm river in the T'ai mountains. The region, although dominated by the Viet Minh, was still supportive of the French. Also, the T'ai capital of Lai Chu north of Dien Bien Phu, although cut off, was held by French-officered local units.

Initially, Operation Castor and the seizure of Dien Bien Phu as a base *aéro-terrestre* was intended to distract Giap from Lai Chu and so relieve the T'ai units ready for an evacuation with Operation Pollux. Once French paratroops had linked up with the T'ais they would use Dien Bien Phu as a 'mooring point' from which to attack the Viet Minh's rear areas. This was a terrible gamble because Dien Bien Phu had no ground link with other French garrisons and was 275km by air from Hanoi. Nonetheless, the success at Na San indicated that a garrison could be kept resupplied.

To facilitate Castor, Navarre gathered an initial spearhead of French and Vietnamese paratroops with full combat kit at the Giam-Lam and Bach-Mai airfields just outside Hanoi. These men were under the command of seasoned veterans of the Indochina War, majors Marcel Bigeard, Jean Brechignac and Jean Souquet. On the runways were sixty-seven C-47 Skytrain transport aircraft. Another aircraft carrying Lieutenant General Pierre Bodet, Brigadier General Jean Decheaux and newly promoted Brigadier General Jean Gilles was soon circling over a drizzle and mist shrouded Dien Bien Phu. On their command, three parachute battalions were poised to attack, with the task of seizing three drops zones dotted through the valley.



Vietnamese
National Army on
parade, Hanoi, 1951.
(Photo Huyme)

Fatefully, on 20 November 1953, Airborne Battle Group 1, consisting of the 1st and 6th colonial parachute battalions and the 2nd Battalion, 1st Chasseurs Parachute Regiment, jumped over the northern and southern drop zones designated 'Natasha' and 'Simone' respectively. Major Bigeard's 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion, landing at 'Natasha', unexpectedly encountered some resistance from Viet Minh regulars who were in the valley undergoing training. Bigeard recalled, 'When we came down on November 20 were told there would be no Vietnamese. But there were two companies exactly where we jumped. Some of my men were killed before they even touched the ground, others were stabbed where they landed.'

His men, recovering tons of equipment, found that many of their radios had not survived the drop and some of their mortars were missing. Bigeard, gathering three of his four companies, and without waiting for support, attacked Dien Bien Phu village. He was met by resistance from Viet Minh regulars of the 148th Regiment, but at 3.00 pm, Souquet's 1st Colonial Parachute Battalion, who had jumped in support, arrived to help. The Viet Minh withdrew in good order and the villagers fled into the mountains. French losses for the day proved to be light, with thirteen dead and forty wounded.

A second force of paratroops jumped into the valley the following day, 21 November, with their commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Langlais, who injured a leg, and the overall commander of the operation, Brigadier General Gilles. The Airborne Battle Group 2 comprised the 1st Foreign Legion Parachute, 5th Vietnamese Parachute and the 8th Parachute Assault battalions. A third drop zone, called 'Octavie', was used further south to deliver heavy supplies. The parachute of one of the two bulldozers dropped failed to open fully and it buried itself into the ground.

Dien Bien Phu

By 22 November, after the arrival of a fresh battalion of Vietnamese, there were 4,560 troops at Dien Bien Phu. Langlais, much to his irritation, was airlifted back to Hanoi to get his leg plastered, returning several weeks later.

The paras set about securing the heart-shaped valley, which is 19km long and 13km wide and surrounded by heavily forested hills. They had possession of the village of Dien Bien Phu and a nearby airfield west of the Nam Youm, plus a second one on the east bank to the south of Ban Long Nhai. The first was quickly refurbished, ready for the first C-47 transport aircraft that would form the vital lifeline for the isolated garrison. Defences were also built, while patrols pushed into the hills. At the end of the month, the paras began to pull out to be replaced by infantry. It was now that Giap responded, despatching his 308th and 312th divisions towards the valley.

The first indication that Operation Castor was not destined to go well occurred with the withdrawal from Lai Chau. Although the town had acted as a useful base of operations, it was indefensible, sitting as it did in a valley at the confluence of the Black and Nam Na rivers. It only had a small, exposed dirt airstrip that was prone to flooding. The only other way in and out was by means of a narrow jungle track.

When Lieutenant Colonel Trancart, the French commander at Lai Chau, was told of the planned evacuation in mid-November, he immediately despatched the 700-strong 1st T'ai Partisan Mobile Group to Dien Bien Phu. After a week-long march and a series of communist ambushes, they finally reached their destination. The mobile group's departure



French troops in a damaged village near the Plaine des Jarres, May 1953.

clearly signalled that General Cogy viewed the defence of Lai Chau as untenable, particularly now that Giap's 316th Division was bearing down on the town.

Operation Pollux commenced on 7 December, when generals Cogy and Gilles landed in Lai Chau to personally break the bad news to Deo Van Long, president of the T'ai Federation. French aircraft transported the 301st Vietnamese Infantry Battalion, a para-troop company, elements of the 2nd Moroccan Battalion, 7th Company, 2nd T'ai Battalion and 327 Senegalese of the headquarters staff from the town in over 180 flights. Deo Van Long and his entourage were flown to Hanoi and exile.

To local communist spies, it was all too obvious what was going on. Trancart departed on 10 December after overseeing the destruction of 300 tons of ammunition and 40 vehicles that could not be salvaged. Some 400 mules and pack horses were abandoned. When Giap's 316th Division moved into Lai Chau two days later they found the French Tricolore still defiantly flying.

Tragically, some 2,100 T'ai irregular light infantry and 36 Europeans were left behind, with the impossible task of fighting their way to Dien Bien Phu. They should have gone earlier with the 1st T'ai Partisan Mobile Group. Instead, many of the remaining T'ai, faced with the prospect of leaving their homes, deserted. The rest, divided into four groups and armed with only rifles, sub-machine guns and a few mortars, were constantly harassed and ambushed by communist and pro-communist forces. They were kept resupplied by air drop.

Seven companies under Lieutenant Guillermit became trapped at Pa Ham Pass and were overrun on 10 December, with just 150 men under Sergeant Arsicaud escaping to Muong Tong, 15km south of Lai Chu. There, 600 irregulars gathered before heading south, hoping to catch Lieutenant Ulpat's column, which included women and children. On 18 December, Dien Bien Phu informed Arsicaud that Ulpat's men, who were just a day's march ahead of him, had been wiped out. His force then came under attack that night and vanished.

Sergeant Blanc, with three other companies as well as elements of the Partisan Mobile Group and dependents from the Vietnamese battalion, were trapped at Muong Pon, 70km from Lai Chu. He tried to get the women and children to a relief column formed by the 2nd Airborne Group that was fighting its way northwards towards him, but failed. His force disappeared while under attack during the night of 12–13 December. The relief column arrived in Muong Pon to find it deserted. Of the twenty T'ai



Colonel de Castries, the French garrison commander, Dien Bien Phu.

companies that had marched out of Lai Chu, the remains of barely half a dozen reached Dien Bien Phu, with just 175 men.

The 2nd Airborne Group also had to fight its way back. In an ominous taste of things to come, reconnaissance aircraft and fighter-bombers supporting it reported being hit by anti-aircraft fire.

The 2nd Airborne Group under Langlais conducted another reconnaissance raid on 23 December, with the aim of linking up with Laotian light infantry and Moroccan Tabors from Laos. The rendezvous point was the Laotian town of Sop Nao, which was in a very mountainous area, thick with jungle and ideal for ambush. Although the link-up was effected two days later, the task force was harried by a mobile enemy and had to return by a far worse route. This again showed that offensive operations conducted from Dien Bien Phu were almost impossible, due to the presence of the enemy and the extremely unforgiving terrain.

Upon gaining intelligence on Giap's movements, Navarre and Cogne began to reconsider their plans. It seemed that Dien Bien Phu might act as bait from where the French could crush the Viet Minh, or at least act as a diversion in anticipation of an attack on the Red River Delta. Also, the almost complete destruction of the T'ai units meant that the original plan to use it as a rallying point was now completely redundant. Dien Bien Phu went from a forward operating base to a fortified camp, defended by a series of armed positions in the same manner as Na San. By the end of the year, there were almost 5,000 French troops at Dien Bien Phu. The scene was set for the decisive battle of the First Indochina War.



Beginning in May 1953, America lent the French six Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcars.

Prelude to Defeat

All grossly underestimated Giap's capabilities: in Saigon, General Navarre, Lieutenant General Pierre Bodet, his deputy commander-in-chief, General Lauzin, commander of the French air force in Indochina, and Colonel Jean-Louis Nicot, commanding the Indochina air transport group, and in Hanoi, General Cogny and General Jean Dechaux, commander Tactical Air Group North Crucially, they failed to take fully into account the growing power of Giap's artillery and anti-aircraft units, nor did they appreciate his considerable logistical support. They could not conceive that Giap would commit five divisions to Dien Bien Phu. Nor could they conceive that the Viet Minh could capture the surrounding hills and lug their heavy artillery up onto them. If that happened, the French would not be fighting a mobile battle from a fortified base, but instead they would be facing a siege.

General Navarre's hands were now tied, as he noted:

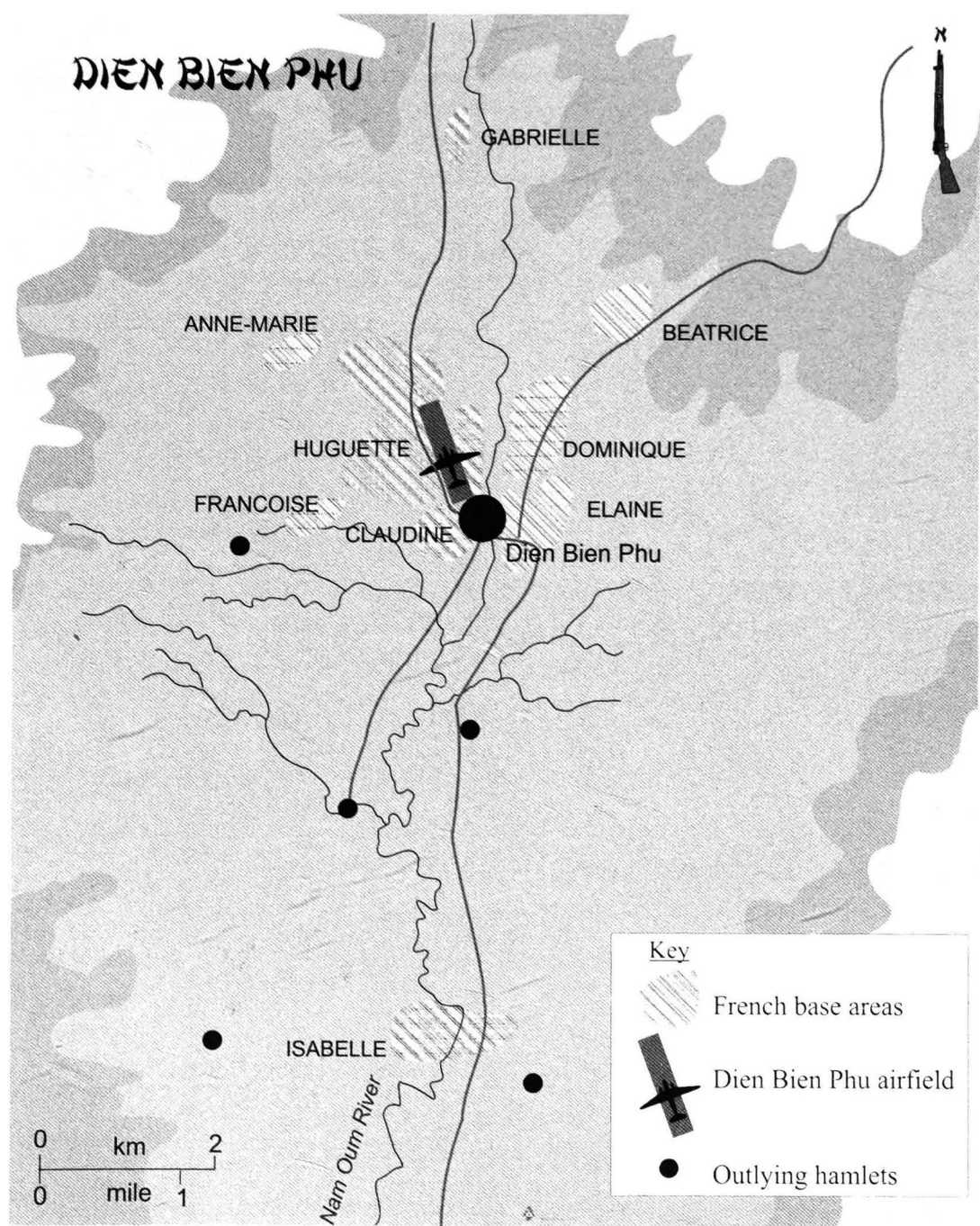
When I occupied Dien Bien Phu I expected to have to deal with two divisions, then eventually two and a half, three ... It was not until 20 December that I learned we would actually be dealing with four divisions. At that point it was too late to evacuate Dien Bien Phu ... If I had withdrawn I would have lost all our men and supplies.



Communist anti-aircraft guns included old Second World War German MG34s.

13. FORTRESS DIEN BIEN PHU

Unbeknown to the French and the Vietnamese, the whole war had led up to this very point in time at Dien Bien Phu. What followed was not a particularly large battle, but it was to prove decisive. Construction of the central base and headquarters area commenced in late November 1953, but work on the perimeter defences did not start until mid-December.



The initial success of Castor, in terms of securing the base, soon meant that Dien Bien Phu was welcoming high-ranking military and political tourists. These included generals Navarre, Cogy and Lauzin, and even the French defence minister René Pleven. Navarre and Gilles were photographed together at Dien Bien Phu in December. They and the six officers behind them all looked in an ebullient mood.

Foreign visitors included the British High Commissioner, Malcolm McDonald, and the British military attaché, General Spears. Among the Americans, was the U.S. army commander in the Pacific, General John 'Iron Mike' O'Daniels. He was a veteran of the First and Second World Wars and had served in Korea as a corps commander. O'Daniels was photographed during his visit and he did not look impressed. Pleven, on the other hand, came away with the right impression.

By the new year Dien Bien Phu, had been fortified with eight defensive bastions, forming an outer and inner ring. To the north of the main airfield, running in an arc through the edge of the surrounding hills, were the defensive positions 'Francoise', 'Anne-Marie', 'Gabrielle' and 'Beatrice'. Gabrielle to the far north was the farthest from the main base. In the centre of the village was the command HQ, with the inner ring comprising 'Huguette' to the northwest of the main airfield, 'Dominique' to the east, 'Claudine' just to the south, and 'Elaine' to the southeast. The most isolated outpost was 'Isabelle', built below the smaller airstrip and some 6.5km from the main base area.

Anne-Marie, Gabrielle, Beatrice and Elaine were built on the lower hills on the fringe of the valley. The rest were largely on the flat valley floor. During a visit, General Navarre had expressed concern that Beatrice, built on a high hill, was isolated, and that if it was captured, it would enable the enemy to overlook the entire base area. He was reassured that if ever this should happen they would be blasted off by the artillery.

Despite any reservations he may have had, General Navarre, having made his decision to fight, poured men and equipment into the valley to ensure that it was the rock upon which the Viet Minh tide would be broken. During December 1953 and January 1954, infantry, armour and artillery units streamed into Dien Bien Phu by air. The garrison at this stage numbered around 10,800 men, backed by two groups of artillery with 75mm, 105mm and 155mm guns, 10 M24 Chaffee light tanks, and 9 Bearcat fighter bombers, stationed on the main airfield.

Viet Minh spies watched with interest as the French set about building their defences across the valley floor. The constant drone of transport aircraft indicated that a major French build-up was underway. From the end of November 1953 through January 1954, an average of 165 tons was delivered every day. It was evident from all the activity to the north around the airfield that this was the focus of the French fortifications, and was therefore where the weight of the Viet Minh assault would take place. Just before battle commenced, Giap had detected 'forty-nine strong-posts, group into three main sectors [around the airfield] capable of supporting each other'.

Many of the French paras, including the 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Light Infantry Regiment, 1st Colonial Parachute Battalion and the 5th Vietnamese Parachute Battalion, were withdrawn to act as a mobile reserve. Only the legionnaires of the 1st Para Battalion and the 8th Para Shock Battalion remained. The others were replaced with more heavily armed infantry units and four battalions from the Foreign Legion that included the 1st and 3rd battalions from the 2nd and 3rd Foreign Legion infantry regiments respectively, and the 1st and 3rd battalions of the 13th Foreign Legion Demi-Brigade.



Vietnamese troops digging trenches near Dien Bien Phu's main airfield.

The French showed great ingenuity in getting some of their heavier equipment to the base. When base commander Colonel de Castries requested a squadron of tanks, this posed a particular problem as they were simply too heavy to air drop. The U.S.-built Chaffee tanks had to be dismantled and flown into Dien Bien Phu. Each 18-ton tank was broken down into 180 parts that took six C-47 sorties and two by British Bristol 170 freighters, requisitioned from a commercial Indochinese airline, to deliver. The latter were the only aircraft capable of taking the tanks' hulls. Foreign Legion mechanics reassembled the Chaffees beside the main runway, completing one every two days. Similarly, each 155mm howitzer needed two C-47s and one Bristol 170, plus another seventeen C-47s for the gun crews and ammunition.

The garrison was also bolstered by six battalions of colonial troops, consisting of the 2nd battalion, 1st Algerian Rifle Regiment, the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Algerian Rifle Regiment, the 5th Battalion, 7th Algerian Rifle Regiment, the 1st Battalion, 4th Moroccan Rifle Regiment, plus the 2nd and 3rd T'ai battalions.

Artillery units included the 2nd and 3rd artillery groups, the 4th and 10th colonial artillery regiments, and the 1st Foreign Legion Airborne Heavy Mortar Company. The tanks served with the 1st Light Horse Regiment.

The French air force and navy were called on to support Dien Bien Phu. They operated from four main airfields dotted around Hanoi: Bach Mai to the north, Gia Lam to the east, and Don Son and Cat Bi to the south. Notably, the Flying Boxcar transports of Armée de l'Air flew from Cat Bi. The F4U-7 and AU-1 Corsairs of the Navy's Flottille 14F flew out of Bach Mai. The air force was able to provide two fighter squadrons, two bomber squadrons and four squadrons of transports. Naval aviation comprised two dive-bomber squadrons and a bomber squadron.



A squadron of French Bearcats was deployed to Dien Bien Phu to provide air-to-ground support.

Despite this impressive order of battle, it was nowhere near the strength committed to Operation Loraine. Unlike previous French fire bases, the widely dispersed defences at Dien Bien Phu were far from perfect. It was likened to an idyllic death trap. The picturesque valley was simply too large for a tight all-round defence and too small to manoeuvre in. Notably, the surrounding hills that rise up to 2,500ft easily dominated the principal 1,200yd airfield. The engineers calculated that they required 36,000 tons of equipment – total deliveries for the entire battle only amounted to 22,500 tons. This would have required 12,000 C-47 Skytrain flights from Hanoi. All they received was a third of this tonnage and three-quarters of the deliveries were barbed wire. Here lay part of the cause for the French defeat, because the fortifications were not capable of withstanding an artillery barrage.

To protect the base, Colonel des Castries had just twenty-four American 105mm howitzers, four short-barrelled 155mm howitzers, and thirty-two 120mm heavy mortars. The one-armed Colonel Charles Piroth, commanding these units, considered them more than capable of breaking up enemy attacks. They would provide effective counter-battery fire when the time came. Piroth also thought that the air force operating from the airfield and the delta would pounce on any enemy guns once they started firing. He was completely contemptuous of Giap's gunners, claiming, 'No Viet Minh gun will fire three rounds without being destroyed.'



French troops supported by a Bison light tank.

This was a fatal miscalculation. His batteries were poorly protected. The guns were placed in large circular pits that were very vulnerable to indirect shell and mortar fire.

Piroth, who had lost his left arm in Italy in 1943, was an experienced gunner. Despite his outward confidence, however, he knew his resources were inadequate, pointing out

to Colonel de Winter, his superior in Hanoi, that he had fewer artillery pieces than that normally supporting an infantry division. The location of Isabelle particularly hamstrung Piroth's artillery. By the end of January, two batteries had been deployed there, but these were too far away to offer any support to the northern strongpoints. In addition, Piroth's guns relied on observation posts in the hills and six light observation planes. Once the shooting started, these would be lost very quickly. The result was that his gunners would be reliant on spotter planes making a three-hour trip from Muong Sai in Laos.

Concealed in the dense jungles around Dien Bien Phu, Giap and his Chief of Staff, General Hoang Van Thai, began gathering their 304th, 308th, 312th, 316th and 351st divisions, amounting to over 50,000 men. As the latter unit was organized as a heavy division, it had a bigger provision of artillery and mortars, with at least thirty American 105mm (captured in Korea) and eighteen, largely Japanese, 75mm guns, fifty 120mm heavy mortars, and sixty 75mm recoilless guns. Of equal importance, it had an anti-aircraft regiment armed with thirty-six 37mm anti-aircraft guns.

In total, including the artillery battalions serving with the other divisions, Giap had about 145 field howitzers. By early March, he had available some 15,000 105mm and 5,000 75mm shells. Two thirds of the 105mm ammunition was already in the Dien Bien Phu area. However, the Japanese 75mm Type 94 mountain gun was obsolete and much of its ammunition was a decade old.

Once again, the hand of Mao, in the form of General Wei and his advisers, was evident. The Chinese Communists had ample experience with the American M2 A1 105mm howitzer, which had been captured in quantity during the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. This weapon could drop four high-explosive rounds a minute onto a target up to a range of over 11,000m. According to Giap, the 351st Division received around fifty 105s from the Chinese, most of which had been taken in Korea, and that thirty-six were deployed at Dien Bien Phu. Most of these weapons had presumably been captured from the South Korean rather than the U.S. army.

Equally important was the training his gunners of the 45th Artillery Regiment received on these weapons in southern China. Once they were outside the French base, they ensured their 105s were well dug in and concealed from the air. Dummy guns were also deployed to draw French fire. Artillery observers, with uninterrupted views of the airfield and French defences, took up position to accurately direct the gun fire.

The Viet Minh hacked five routes through the jungle toward the



General Giap.

French base. As well as tens of thousands of porters on foot and using bicycles to shift supplies, Giap's men had 600 Russian-built 2.5-ton lorries, which travelled by night with their lights off to avoid attracting attention. Nonetheless, the weather and French air force together conspired to ensure that this build-up did not run smoothly. The torrential rains turned the valleys into marshes and many fords were impassable. French pilots attacked the Lung Lo and Phadin passes, resulting in sections of the roads sliding into the ravines below.

The French were not ignorant of the Viet Minh build-up, as their air force had detected the movement of men and equipment. By early December, it was estimated that Giap would have about 49,000 men under his command. Aerial intelligence also showed that Giap's 105s had been removed from their rear-base areas. A sizeable attack on Dien Bien Phu was now inevitable.



Giap's logistical support comprised tens of thousands of porters.

14. A DISHONOURED MAN

Giap officially let his presence at Dien Bien Phu be known on 31 January 1954 when his artillery opened fire. They spent six long weeks making and adjusting ranging shots across the base. While the French found it increasingly bothersome, Giap slowly collected very important targeting intelligence. Throughout February, French patrols kept detecting Viet Minh regular units, confirming that Giap had taken the bait and was prepared to fight.

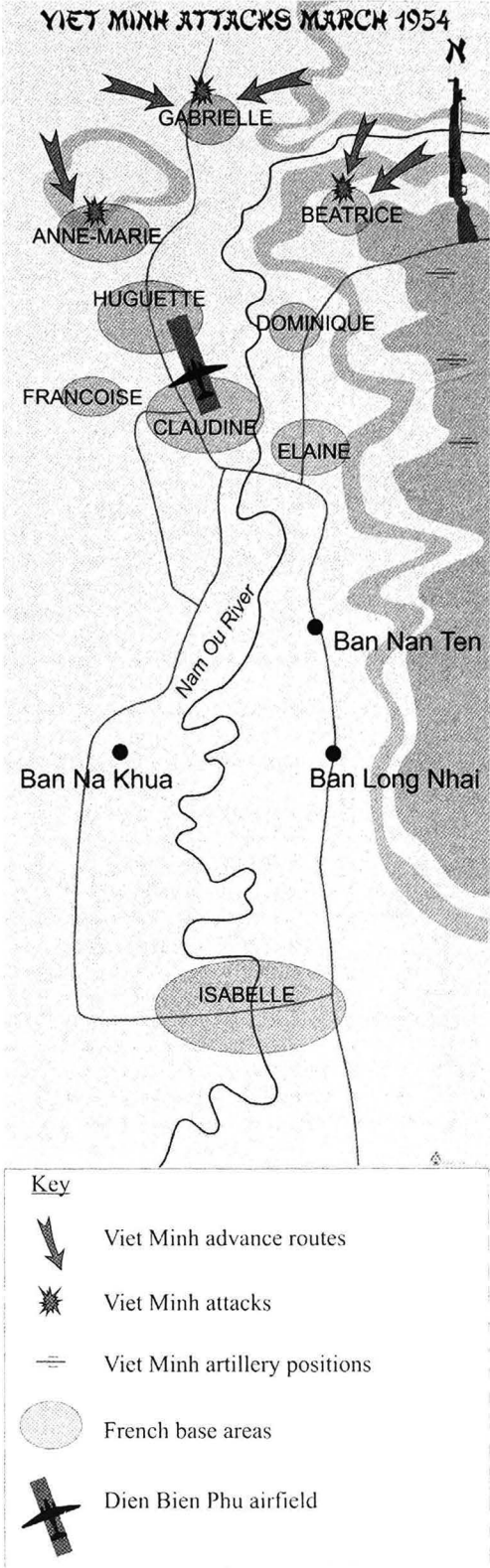
By the middle of the month, any plans to stretch the French defences out to encompass the higher surrounding hills had been abandoned. By doing so Colonel de Castries surrendered the initiative and the vital high ground to Giap. De Castries did not have the manpower to create a wider perimeter, but he should have done his utmost to disrupt the Viet Minh preparations. Instead, he settled back to await Giap's first attack.

General Navarre paid his last visit to the base on 4 March 1954, during which he discussed with de Castries bringing in reinforcements. The general was clearly rattled by the strength of the force Giap had brought to bear on the valley.

'I was much less confident than the local commandant,' said Navarre. 'I thought of suddenly bringing in three additional battalions – and since the Viet Minh were very methodical I thought they would then think twice.'

De Castries reassured him that they were not needed and should be kept in reserve. 'That is what I did,' recalled Navarre, 'I was probably wrong.'

During November and December, the valley was verdant and dotted with trees. By early March, it had been turned into a desolate lunar landscape. The trees had been hacked or blasted down and the banks of the Nam Youm River stripped bare. The central headquarters area on the west bank was a mass of bunkers, earthworks, trenches and revetments. Just to the north were





French machine-gunners awaiting attack.

the gun pits for some of the 105s and the 155s. Beyond them were aircraft dispersal pens created by banked earth.

Both sides knew that the fighting would commence to the north. It was the Algerian garrison of Gabrielle that sustained the first probing attacks on 11 March. Giap had a choice to either take Gabrielle or cut it off by capturing Anne-Marie and Beatrice to the southwest and southeast. It was decided to attack all three. However, looking at their maps, Giap and his divisional commanders decided that Beatrice, consisting of four strongpoints that were out on a limb, would be their next main target. The battle of Dien Bien Phu was about to start in earnest.

Colonel de Castries knew roughly where the blow was to fall. The following day, he briefed his commanders to expect an attack on the 13th at 5.00 pm. His suspicions were confirmed when Viet Minh movements were detected in the area of Beatrice and Gabrielle, after two regiments from the 312th Division moved into position less than 100yd from the French defences. The vulnerability of the main airfield and the airstrip near Isabelle were soon illustrated when artillery fire ranged in from 9.00 am on 12 March, destroying two C-47s, while others were riddled with shrapnel on the taxiways or as they tried to come in to land.

Just two Bearcats were serviceable that day, the rest having been damaged by the hail of hot shell fragments. They managed ten sorties between them, buzzing angrily around the valley looking for somewhere to drop their 500lb bombs. The fighter and transport

pilots found themselves attracting increasing anti-aircraft fire from machine guns, 20mm cannons and 37mm AA guns concealed beneath the dense hillside foliage. Six Hellcats flying from the carrier *Arromanches* tried to help suppress the flak, but struggled to find their targets and futilely bombed the same locations. Unable to get back to the carrier, one of the aircraft crashed trying to find Cat Bi airfield.

At 5.15 pm on 13 March, Giap's 105s began to drop shells onto Beatrice for the next two hours. It was a shocking taste of things to come. Communication trenches were blasted into oblivion, inadequate gun positions and bunkers collapsed. Deadly flying debris and shock waves killed or wounded anyone caught in the open. French counter-battery fire proved wholly ineffective. Beatrice lost two 105mm guns to enemy artillery fire. The French, in a desperate attempt to protect the three northern outposts, wastefully fired off 25 per cent of their 105mm ammunition in one night. Lieutenant Colonel Jules Gaucher, the post commander, and the men of Major Paul Pégot's 3rd Battalion, 13th Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion, braced themselves for the inevitable.

While Beatrice and the airfield were being bombarded, shells also fell on Gabrielle, Dominique and Isabelle. On the airfield, accurate shelling took out the VHF radio beacon, damaged the temporary control tower and blew up two Bearcats. At Dominique, a heavy-mortar platoon, just about to provide counter-preparation fire on the Viet Minh's assembly trenches before Beatrice, was pulverized by a direct hit on one of the weapon pits. Then their ammunition dump containing 5,000 mortar bombs exploded in a brilliant ball of flames. The garrison of Gabrielle was also prevented from providing supporting fire to Beatrice by a series of diversionary attacks.

Crawling forward from their assault trenches, at 6.15 pm, brave Viet Minh sappers blew holes in the remaining barbed wire around Beatrice. Fifteen minutes later, just as their infantry opened the assault, Beatrice's battalion command post received a number



Troops of the 1st Foreign Legion Heavy Mortar company who fought at Dien Bien Phu.

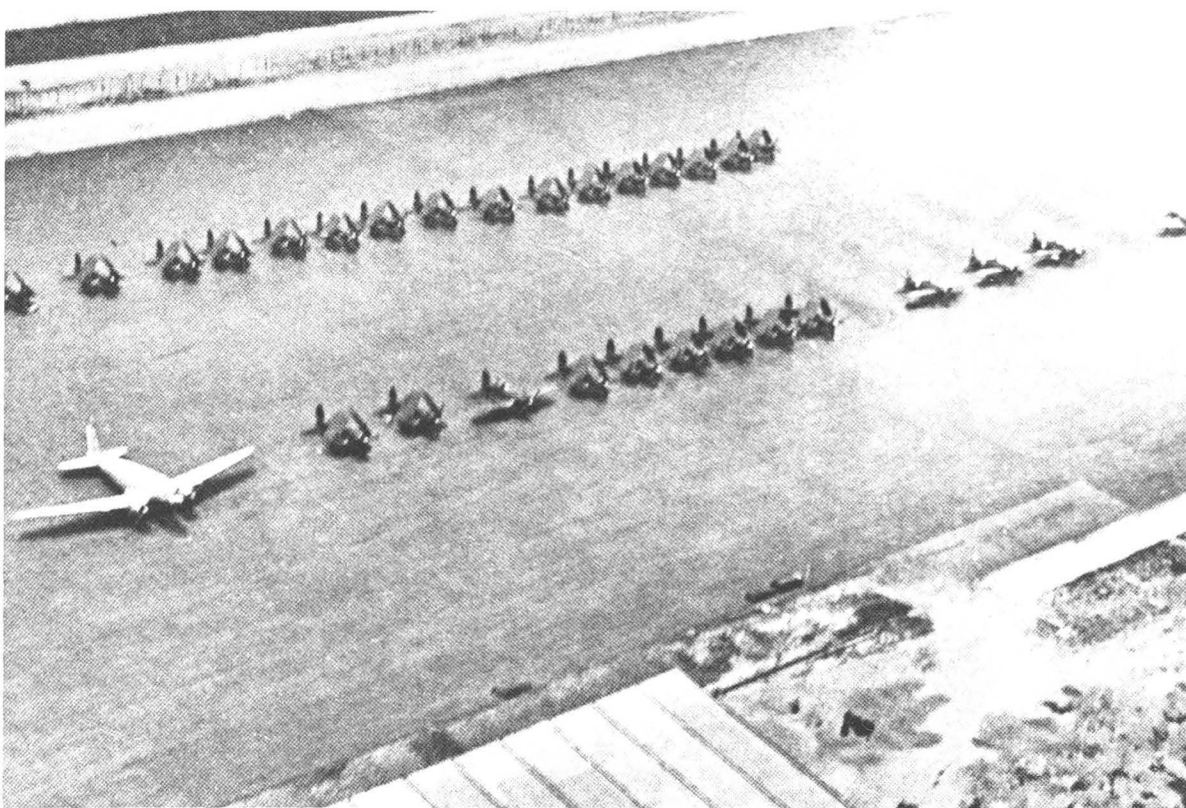
of direct hits. Pégot was killed and Gaucher mortally wounded. Despite losing their senior officers, the legionnaires engaged in desperate hand-to-hand combat as the Viet Minh sought to overwhelm them. By 9.00 pm, just one strongpoint was still holding out. Three hours later it was all over.

The garrison suffered 75 per cent casualties with just over 100 men escaping back to their lines. Giap's artillery stopped firing and a stunned silence fell over the valley. The stench of explosives hung in the air.

Colonel de Castries was shocked that Beatrice had held for just six hours. If Giap could repeat this success, then Dien Bien Phu was unlikely to last much more than a week. In the early hours of 14 March, he reluctantly reported to Cogny in Hanoi that he had lost a battalion and Beatrice. This was at a cost of around 125 dead and some 200 captured, most of whom were wounded. As Giap had intended, Gabrielle was now extremely isolated, and the 88th and 165th regiments from the 308th and 312th divisions moved into position ready to strike.

General Navarre was dismayed by the incoming reports of the strength, accuracy and closeness of the Viet Minh guns:

All the French and American artillerymen who had visited Dien Bien Phu – and there were many Americans – thought that the Viet Minh would have to stay behind the ridges to fire on the entrenched camp. The surprise was that they managed to bring their artillery much closer than we had thought possible.



Tourane airfield, in 1954, showing 25 Vought F4U-7/AU-1 Corsairs, four Grumman F8F Bearcats and a solitary Douglas C-27 Skytrain.

On 14 March, French reinforcements arrived in the form of a para drop by the 5th Vietnamese Parachute Battalion, commanded by Captain Botella. De Castries briefly contemplated trying to retake Beatrice, but low cloud and poor weather made close air support impossible. At 6.00 pm, Giap's batteries began shelling Gabrielle, which was held by a battalion of Algerians with eight Foreign Legion 120mm mortars. Although they beat off the first assault, by dawn on the 15th, they were only holding on in one remaining outpost.

Lieutenant Colonel Trancart, who was in charge of the northern sector, was watching the heavy shelling of Gabrielle when a distraught Colonel Piroth came into his dugout.

'I am completely dishonoured,' cried Piroth. 'I have guaranteed de Castries that the enemy artillery couldn't touch us – but now we are going to lose the battle.'

The admission that no one wanted to hear, or acknowledge, was true.

Lieutenant Colonel Langlais organized a counterattack towards Gabrielle, employing two companies of legionnaires and one battalion of Vietnamese paratroopers, supported by six tanks. They fought their way to within 1,000yd of the Algerians, enabling 150 men to escape to safety. De Castries had lost his second outlying strongpoint in just two days. Within the garrison there was a sinking feeling that after all their efforts in building the base's defences, perhaps Dien Bien Phu was untenable.

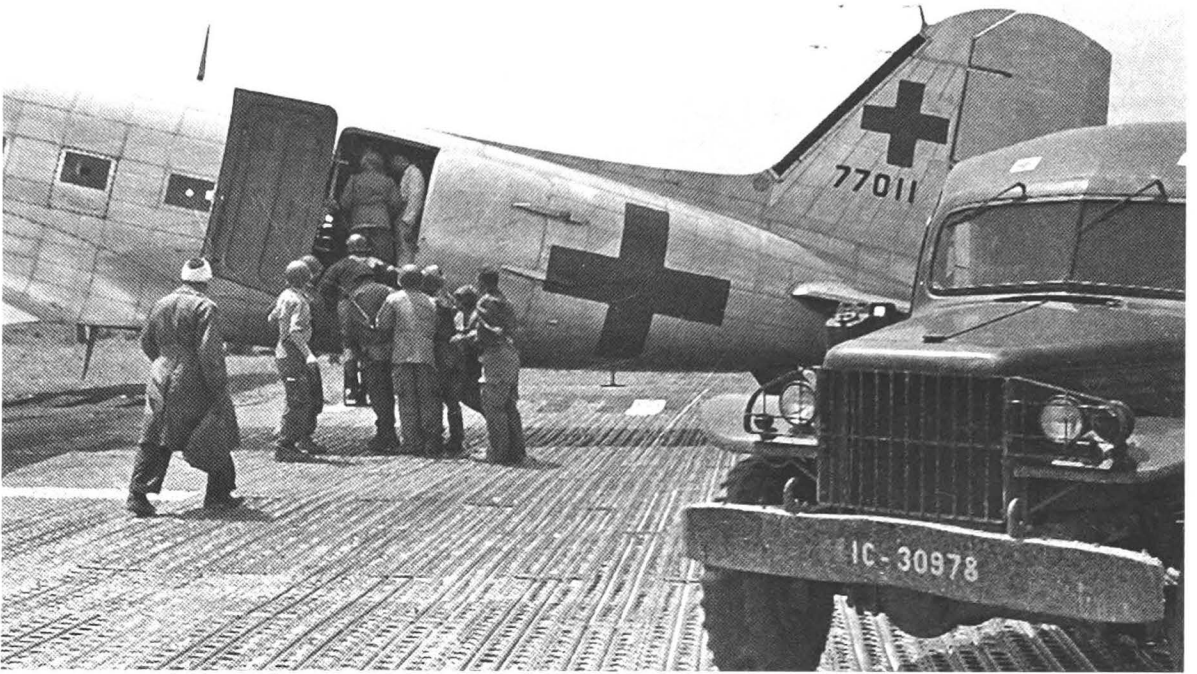
Unfortunately for them, generals Navarre and Cogy were not Leclerc or de Lattre – both the latter would have quickly taken firm control of the situation and sought a solution to safeguard the garrison. Indeed, neither of them would have ever dreamed of underestimating their enemy and extending French forces in such a manner. The uninspired de Castries seemed to slip into an ever-deepening despondency, while Navarre and Cogy strove to blame each other for the unfolding mess.

Even at this early stage in the battle, everyone at senior level was preparing for a worst-case scenario. The French had the decisive conventional battle they had always hoped for, but they were already losing. They had realized too late that Dien Bien Phu was simply too damn far away. The agony, though, was only just beginning. In Saigon and Hanoi, the only solution was to belatedly send in the paras to beef up the defences. They could come up with no other options.

Langlais, commander of the Airborne Battle Group 2, was furious at how the action was progressing. De Castries was a reflective-looking man, whereas Langlais was wiry, gaunt and tough in appearance. He never seemed to be without a cigarette firmly clamped between his lips. Langlais was described as hatchet-faced, while de Castries was dubbed aloof and highly aristocratic.

Although de Castries lacked neither courage nor panache, he was overwhelmed by unfolding events and did not have the ability to control a battle of this magnitude. To be fair however, he was operating way above his pay grade. He was commanding a division-sized operation that required a general. The French, though, always ran these types of operation employing a colonel, for fear of losing someone more senior. If anyone should have been in command, it was Brigadier General Gilles as the ranking officer.

The angry Langlais took his wrath out on Piroth, whose pledge to silence Giap's guns had come back to haunt him. Despite their best effort, his gunners and the French air force had singularly let down the garrison. Feeling dishonoured and ashamed, on 15 March, while in his quarters, Piroth took a hand grenade and pulled the pin using his teeth. His death was hushed up for fear it would harm already poor morale.



French wounded being evacuated.



French trenches at Dien Bien Phu.



Giap's logistical support comprised of tens of thousands of porters.

When Bigeard was informed of Piroth's death he said:

I had known him as a man of duty and heart who had said that as soon as a Vietnamese cannon was found he would overpower it. But they were invulnerable. We could fire 100 shots on their positions and still be incapable of destroying their cannon. Giap had attacked only when he felt that everything was just right.

The following day, the mood lifted slightly when Major Bigeard and his 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion dropped back into the valley. From 14 March to 6 May, the French parachuted and air-landed 4,300 men to reinforce the base. This boost, however, was short lived, as the 3rd T'ai Battalion holding Anne-Marie knew that they would be next in the firing line and have to abandon their posts. Two companies fled from two of Anne-Marie's four positions. A third of Dien Bien Phu's defensive bastions had now fallen.

In Hanoi, General Cogy was anxious about the situation in the Red River Delta. Intelligence showed that the Viet Minh could muster thirty-nine battalions, of which twenty-four were regulars. Their key units were the reconstituted 320th Division and six regular, independent regiments. Additionally, they had some 50,000 communist militiamen. Cogy had at his disposal around 100 battalions, less than a third of which were mobile, and of them, just sixteen were in the mobile groups. He was also concerned that Navarre was persisting with Operation Atlante in southern Vietnam, which was tying up sizeable forces. The bulk of these, however, were ineffectual Vietnamese troops who were proving that Navarre's 'Vietnamization' process was not working.

15. THE VULTURE HOVERS

By early April 1954, it was clear that something drastic needed to be done to help the trapped garrison at Dien Bien Phu. There were three options on the table. The first and most obvious was to get a relief column through to the base to break the siege, dubbed Operation Condor. Secondly, the garrison could fight its way out with Operation Albatros. Lastly, if Washington would agree to help with Operation Vulture, the Viet Minh could be pounded into withdrawing by American heavy bombers.

What Navarre and de Castries really needed was a combination of all three, which would enable the defenders to withdraw into Laos towards Luang Prabang, as this would be slightly easier to get to than the Red River Delta. The loss of Lai Chau and Na San meant that there was no sanctuary for them in western Tonkin. In truth, though, Giap's strength was such that a successful escape was almost impossible. The only real solution was to kill as many of Giap's men as possible to force him to lift the siege.

Condor had originally been conceived in the event of victory as a linkup between those French forces at Dien Bien Phu and those in northeastern Laos. This would have involved around 5,500 troops. During the first week of April, Navarre sent Colonel de Crèvecœur, land forces commander in Laos, instructions to revise Condor. Navarre also sent de Crèvecœur and Colonel Then, his staff officer responsible for operations, a small team to help out.

They had four battalions with just over 3,000 men available, but nearly 1,700 of these were Laotians. Only one unit was European, the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment. This force was optimistically designated Mobile Group North. In the light of the Viet Minh's manpower at Dien Bien Phu, these forces were woefully inadequate, even if they were augmented while on the march. There was little de Crèvecœur and Then could do, but proceed with their mission as they had been given their orders to help.

After some frantic planning, it was proposed that the legionnaires and the 4th Laotian Chasseurs under Lieutenant Colonel Yves Godard would march up the eastern leg of the Nam Ou River bend. A second group, commanded by Major Coquelet, consisting of the 1st Laotian Parachute Battalion and the 5th Laotian Chasseurs, would make their way up the Nam Pak towards Muong Khoua to the west. Then the two columns would merge at Pak Noua and move along the Nam Noua to rendezvous with paras from the 1st and 3rd Vietnamese parachute battalions dropped west of Sop Nao. This force would then proceed through the Massif des Calcaires to reach a point south of Isabelle.

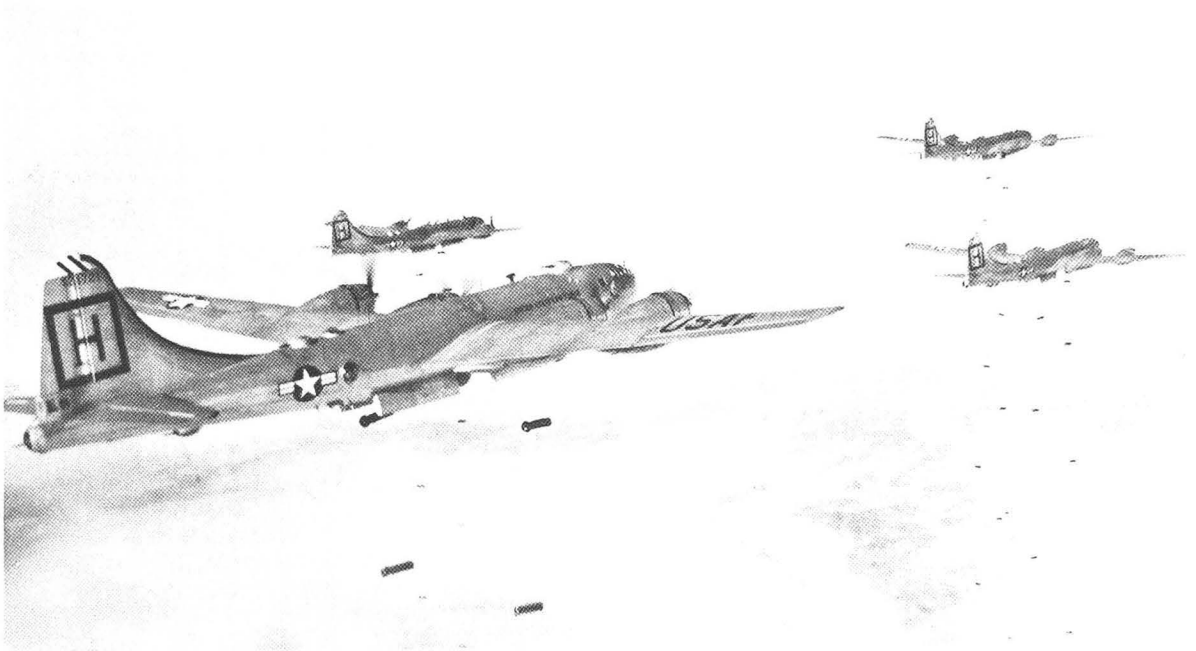
To accomplish this, de Crèvecœur needed 500 porters and 150 mules to carry supplies and ammunition for Mobile Group North, but these were simply not available. The region had been pillaged following the Viet Minh invasion, and the locals had fled. There was also a shortage of jerry cans to transport water and inflatable rafts to get the force over the innumerable streams and rivers that would bar their way. Navarre's response to this

was to have mules and 500 prisoner labourers airlifted in, but this put even greater pressure on the already struggling French transport fleet.

On 14 April, Navarre ordered Condor be implemented. Plans were likewise made ready to carry out Albatros. It quickly turned out that he did not have the resources to conduct the airborne phase of Condor and keep Dien Bien Phu resupplied at the same time. To drop the two para battalions would require diverting all the transport aircraft away from Dien Bien Phu for twenty-four hours. Some would also have to be regularly diverted to supply the rescue columns by air during their advance through the jungles of northeastern Laos. This would inevitably severely disrupt vital ammunition resupply flights into Dien Bien Phu.

Behind the scenes, the French government desperately sought help in Washington. The same day Condor was authorized, General Earle E. Partridge, commanding U.S. Far East Air Forces, arrived in Saigon to prepare an American bombing feasibility study. His bomber commander, General Joseph D. Caldera, flew over Dien Bien Phu three times and concluded that a daytime raid would be possible. Both generals, though, were concerned by the French lack of comprehension of the destructive power of a wing of B-29 Superfortress heavy bombers. Nor did the French seem greatly concerned about inevitable 'collateral' damage.

On 15 April, the French Secretary of State for the Air Force, M. Christiaens, publicly announced that France had asked if it could borrow American B-29s that would be operated by French crews. Such a pretence fooled no one, as the French had no experience of operating this type of bomber. At a staff meeting in Hanoi the following day, General Cogny began exploring alternatives to Condor. He wanted another raid on the communist base at Phu Doan and a para drop to cut Viet Minh supply lines at the Meo Pass, but these were rejected as impractical.



USAF B-29 on a bombing mission over Korea. The French had no concept of the damage such a bomber could cause. In mid-April 1954, the French asked to borrow American B-29 bombers to attack Viet Minh positions at Dien Bien Phu.

In Washington, President Eisenhower was presented with plans that envisaged up to 200 American bombers flying from Manila and Okinawa to destroy Giap's positions around Dien Bien Phu. These proposals also considered options for deploying the U.S. Seventh Fleet to provide up to 150 fighters to escort sixty B-29 bombers to Tonkin. Such a commitment would be a significant game changer for the battle.

It was at this stage that the threat of nuclear war once again reared its ugly head. According to Vice-President Richard Nixon, 'In Washington the Joint Chiefs of Staff devised a plan, known as Operation Vulture, for using three small tactical atomic bombs to destroy Viet Minh positions and relieve the garrison.'

In mid-April, French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault claimed that the Americans had offered to make two bombs available for such an operation. Admiral W. Radford, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, backed going nuclear in Indochina. America had considered doing so in Korea to stop the Chinese, but decided that this would be a step too far in escalating the conflict, besides which, the decision to authorize the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki continued to haunt American policy-makers.

All this discussion about American bombers and nuclear bombs may have been part of a deliberate ploy to get Mao to pressure Ho Chi Minh and Giap to slacken their grip on Dien Bien Phu. Mao acquiesced to the status quo in Korea, partly due to America's very public threats to use tactical nuclear weapons if a negotiated settlement was not reached. In 1950, President Truman had been ambushed by a reporter into stating that the use of nuclear weapons in Korea was a possibility. He inadvertently added that responsibility would rest with General Douglas MacArthur, whereas such a move actually required presidential authorization. This caused an international furore, particularly in Britain, where politicians were aghast at the idea.

Although Truman sought to sooth ruffled feathers, just two weeks into the Korean War, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff did consider the use of atomic bombs in direct support of ground combat. The deployment of up to twenty bombs was discussed, with MacArthur suggesting one be used to cut off any Chinese intervention. The idea was shelved until the end of the year, when Mao committed his armies in North Korea to drive back the UN forces. The following year, with the development of tactical nuclear weapons, a single B-29 had conducted a simulated atomic-bombing run over North Korea. Sabre rattling or not, it signalled intent.

Two years later, with the U.S. military reinvigorated, President Eisenhower was even less reticent. He had begun looking at potential targets in North Korea, China and Manchuria to demonstrate the power of a tactical nuclear bomb. A warning was passed through the Indian prime minister to Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En Lai that if a resolution was not forthcoming, then America would bomb north of the Yalu River.

Whether Eisenhower was bluffing is unclear, but China and the Soviet Union believed him. In late February 1953, Mao sent his leading atomic expert to Moscow to ask Stalin either for a nuclear guarantee or the means of retaliation if Eisenhower used the bomb against China. Stalin died the following month and Chou En Lai, who acted as a pall-bearer at his funeral, returned from Moscow convinced that Eisenhower meant business. The conflict in Korea came to an end.

Eisenhower now faced another terrible decision with Indochina. He had the same dilemma Truman had in not goading China into an all-out war. In 1951, General MacArthur

had been sacked for pressing to expand the Korean War into China, despite the fact that Chinese troops were fighting American soldiers in Korea. In the name of maintaining world peace, the conflict had been confined to Korea.

If Eisenhower agreed to help France, then his actions might save the French garrison, but there was no knowing how the Soviet Union or China might react. Using American-crewed bombers to drop conventional or nuclear bombs would signal Washington's entry into the Indochina War. In response, Mao might commit his ground forces, which would simply overwhelm the French if the Americans did not then put boots on the ground in Tonkin.

General Matthew Ridgway, who had commanded U.S. forces in Korea and then served as Supreme Allied Commander Europe for NATO before being appointed U.S. Army Chief of Staff, was implacably opposed to using nuclear weapons. He wrote:

There is of course the school that argues for the immediate use of nuclear weapons when a stalemate threatens, that talks of "reducing the enemy to the Stone Age" by blowing his homeland to dust. This to me would be the ultimate immorality. It is one thing to do this in retaliation, or as a measure of survival as a nation. It is quite another to initiate such an operation for less basic reasons.

In Saigon, Navarre was nervous that Mao might retaliate by authorizing the Chinese air force to attack the vulnerable French airfields in the Red River Delta. Chinese and indeed Soviet air power, had played a major role in Korea. The French air force did not relish tangling with veteran Chinese or Soviet MiG pilots. This meant that U.S. carrier fighters in the Gulf of Tonkin would have to protect Navarre's airfields as well as striking at Dien Bien Phu. It was hard to see how mission creep could be avoided.

Eisenhower wanted British support with any military intervention in Indochina, but his old ally Churchill would not sanction it. Britain's defence budget was stretched to the limit as it was, and the Korean war had been very unpopular. Churchill was well aware that British intelligence had warned against meddling in Indochina, assessing that, 'Any direct intervention by the armed forces of any external nation would probably lead to Chinese intervention, and there is a danger that it might ultimately lead to a global war.'

In the end, Eisenhower decided against Vulture. The French were on their own.

Everything now hung on Condor and Albatros to retrieve the situation. Intercepted Viet Minh radio messages showed that the 148th Regiment had first reported on the progress of Condor on 20 April. This intelligence also showed that the Viet Minh knew what the French were trying to achieve, and that they anticipated airdrops on Nga Na Song and Sop Nao as they were on the most direct road to Dien Bien Phu.

The following day, Goddard received some bad news: his men captured a small boat on the Nam Ou bearing mortar ammunition. When they interrogated the three-man crew, they discovered that they belonged to a 1,700-strong Viet Minh regiment.

At this point, the vexed issue to transport aircraft became a real problem. On 22 April, Navarre signalled Lieutenant General Pierre Bodet, his deputy commander-in-chief in Hanoi, telling him that the second phase of Condor was on hold until further notice.

By 23 April, the lead elements of Condor force were within 50km of Isabelle, but Giap moved at least four battalions to intercept them. Godard had reached Pak Noua and

Coquelet had reached Muong Khoua. As the airborne element was postponed, Sop Nao was abandoned in favour of Muong Nha as the new drop zone.

Confusion though still reigned over the viability of the para drop and, instead, on 27 April, it was decided to reinforce Godard with two battalions that would somehow be airlifted from central Laos. Two days later, Navarre informed de Crèvecoeur that the airborne phase of Condor could not be conducted for at least another week. Feebly, he washed his hands of the operation by telling de Crèvecoeur it was up to him as to how he wished to proceed. Godard had no choice but go on to the defensive and halt his advance at Muong Khoua.

Colonel de Crèvecoeur's men were left out on a limb in hostile territory. His understandable concern was what would happen to them in the event of Dien Bien Phu falling. By early May, there were ominous reports that some 10,000 Viet Minh from the siege were expected to move into Laos. If that should happen, General Cogny in Hanoi informed him, then Mobile Group North would have to immediately retreat with all haste. He could expect no air support or reinforcements. Effectively, they were being abandoned. De Crèvecoeur and Then must have felt that Condor had been a complete waste of time and that Godard and Coquelet were little more than sacrificial lambs.



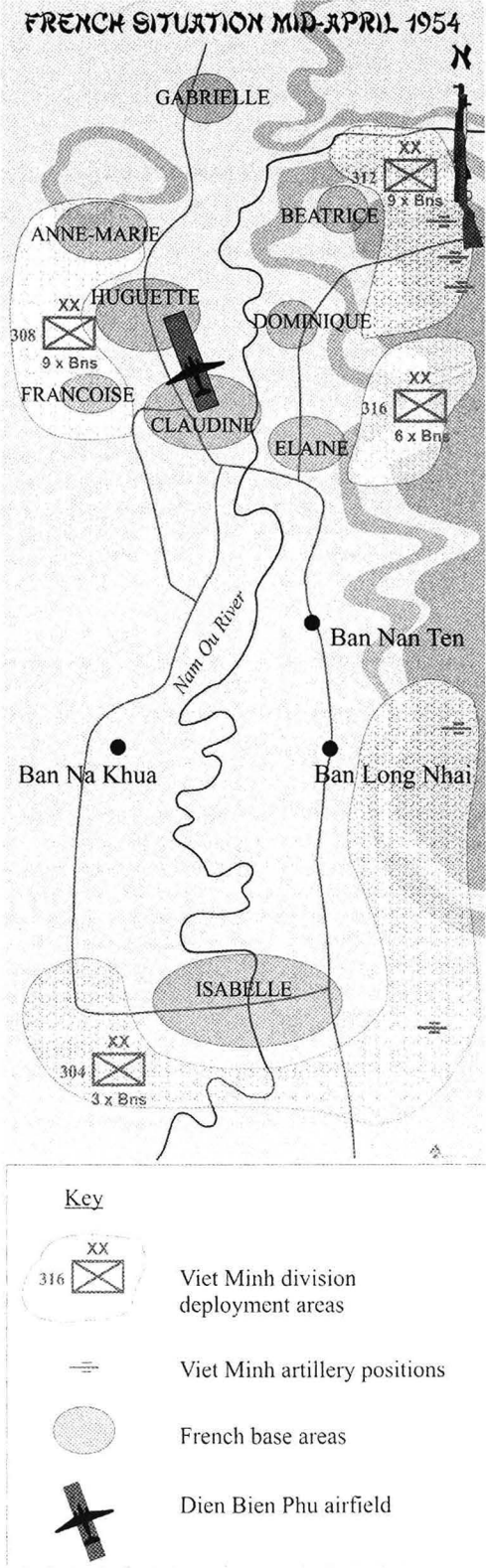
U.S. President Eisenhower welcoming president of South Vietnam Ngo Dinh Diem, left, at Washington National Airport, 1957. Eisenhower threatened to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Korea, but he refused to release heavy bombers or nuclear bombs to support the French in Indochina. (Photo NARA)

16. ISABELLE IS TAKEN

Following the successful capture of Beatrice, Gabrielle and Anne-Marie, General Giap was confident that he could move in for the kill at Dien Bien Phu. The French had completely underestimated his ability to dominate the battlefield, as much as they had overestimated the ability of their fighter-bombers to impede his movements. The French air force only had about 100 strike aircraft, of which three-quarters were committed to the battle, but they could not generate enough sorties to drive the Viet Minh away. Likewise, the French had insufficient transport aircraft.

Now that Giap's artillery completely dominated the main airfield, Cogny could not fly in reinforcements and supplies. The only way to do this was by parachute drop, but the transport aircraft still had to brave enemy anti-aircraft fire on the approach. However, Giap's losses during the frontal assaults had been heavy, and it was decided to revert to good old-fashioned siege warfare before renewing the attack. His men set about completing over seven miles of trenches and approach routes. To the south of the airfield, Viet Minh sappers dug a 50yd tunnel under Elaine and filled it with explosives ready to blast the outpost into oblivion.

It was in the last week of March that what was dubbed rather unkindly the parachute 'Mafia' began to dominate the defence of Dien Bien Phu. The overwhelmed Colonel de Castries informally passed de facto command of the garrison over to Langlais, with the exception of Isabelle, which was under legionnaire Lieutenant Colonel André Lalande. The latter was a highly competent officer who grimly held onto isolated Isabelle, despite constant shelling and attacks. Major Bigeard, who had dropped into the valley with his parachute battalion eight days earlier, was to act alongside Langlais. There could be no hiding de Castries's crippling inertia. Upon his



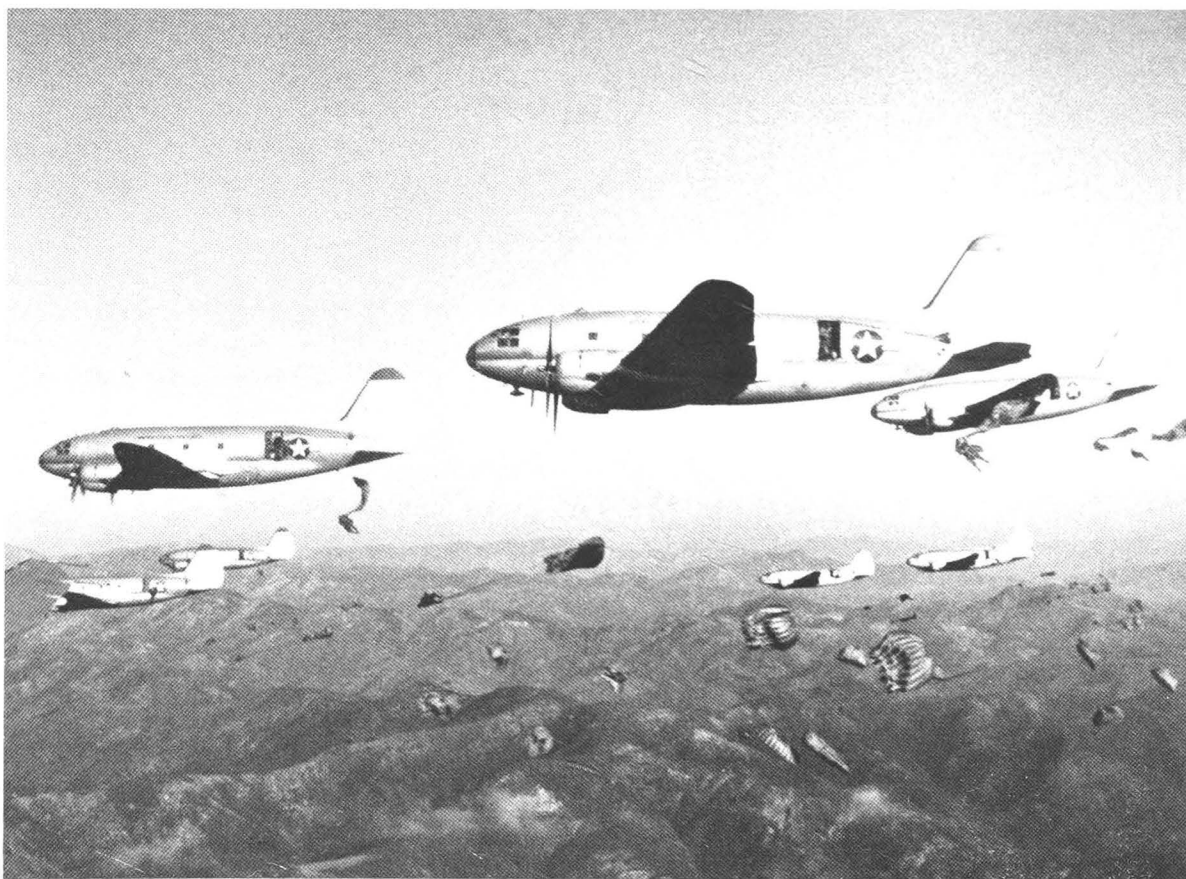
Dien Bien Phu

arrival, Bigeard recalled he 'found a colonel in command who did not dare come out of the shelter'.

Late on 30 March, after heavy preliminary bombardment, Giap launched his second offensive when the 312th and 316th divisions attacked Domonique and Elaine. Bitter fighting followed, with positions continually changing hands. In a single day, French artillery expended 13,000 rounds of 105mm ammunition while supporting those positions under attack. Over the next few days, the Viet Minh also assaulted Huguette and Isabelle. The pressure on the exhausted garrison was relentless, but they fought back with all their strength.

Napalm, used to such devastating effect at Vinh Yen, proved to be far less effective at Dien Bien Phu because of the density of the surrounding jungle. In a bid to break up Giap's massed attacks, French air force Invader and French navy Catalina bombers dropped 227kg Hail (Lazy Dog) anti-personnel cluster bombs, which contained 11,200 finned missiles. These, technically, were not bombs as they contained no explosive. They were solid, unguided kinetic projectiles that could reach up to 500mph before hitting the ground. While these proved highly effective piercing anything with which they came into contact, unfortunately for the defenders there were not enough of these cluster bombs or aircraft to drop them round the clock.

The French position at Francoise was next to fall. When frightened T'ai troops defending the forward outpost fled, the remaining two Foreign Legion companies holding



American C-46D Commandos were used to fly support missions to Dien Bien Phu. (Photo USAF)

the rest of strongpoint were forced to withdraw to Huguette to the northeast. This loss exposed the heavily shelled airfield even more. Lieutenant Colonel Langlais decided not to take any more chances and ordered all T'ai auxiliaries be disarmed, except for their non-commissioned officers. He was fed up with them being untrustworthy.

Giap's 308th Division was thrown against the defences of Huguette on 2 April. Bigeard responded by scraping together men for a counterattack, using elements of four para battalions. The Viet Minh were driven off, leaving 800 dead in the wire. For a brief moment, morale soared, especially when Bigeard's force went on to recapture one of Elaine's lost strongpoints. French professionalism shone out that day.

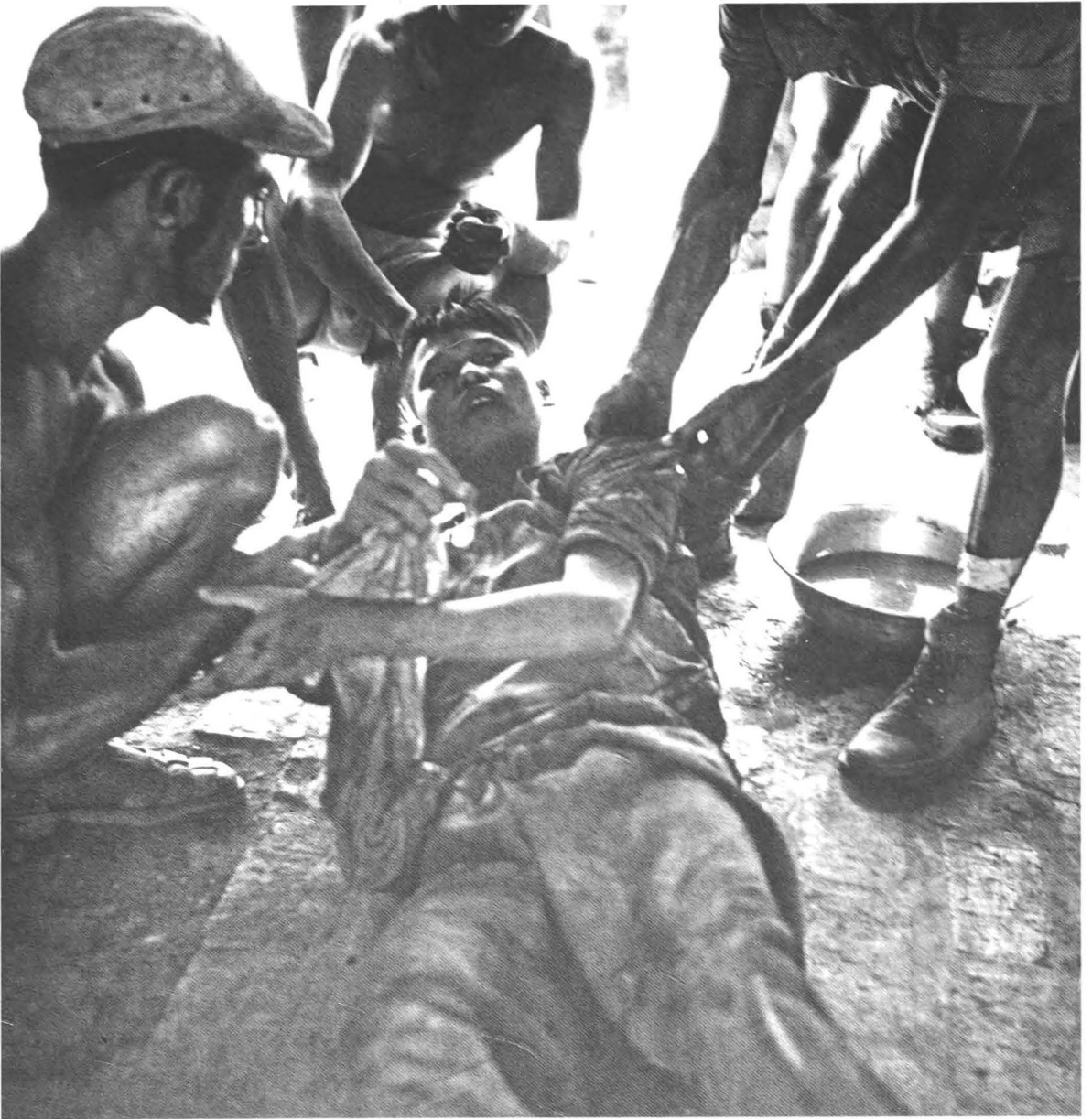
In Saigon and Hanoi, all Navarre and Cogny could do to help was to maintain the airstrikes and supply drops, which amounted to ninety tons daily. Frustratingly, up to 30 per cent of this was missing the French perimeter and falling into the hands of the Viet Minh, who were always grateful for extra 105mm ammunition. In terms of reinforcements, they continued to send in the tough paras. Reinforcements from the 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Infantry Regiment, under Major Bréchignac, jumped on 3-4 April.

Not all was going well for Giap, however, as French firepower was still exacting an appalling toll on his frontal attacks. By 4 April, he had lost almost 2,000 soldiers. French counterattacks had recaptured Domonique and parts of Elaine. Giap decided to pull his men back to recuperate before discipline collapsed. Nonetheless, his artillery kept firing and his men kept working their trenches ever closer to the remaining French positions.

Langlais, Bigeard and de Castries used the time to reorganize their defences. These were now squeezed into an area a little over 1.5km in diameter, encompassing Claudine, Elaine and parts of Domonique and Huguette, with Isabelle still isolated way to the south. To the west, the Viet Minh's 308th Division, with some nine battalions, was ensconced in the captured positions of Anne-Marie and Francoise, relentlessly firing down on Huguette and Claudine. To the east, the 312th Division, with a similar number of battalions, was positioned around Beatrice overlooking Domonique, while to the southwest, Elaine's garrison was faced by the 316th Division with six battalions. The 1,800 men holding Isabelle were cut off by 7 April, as three battalions from the 304th Division had dug trenches all around them.

Two days later, Major Liesenfelt arrived with his 2nd Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion. Altogether three paratroop battalions had reinforced the garrison since mid-March, which meant that some 16,000 French Union troops were surrounded by an estimated 50,000 Viet Minh. Liesenfelt's men reinforced Bigeard's 6th Colonial Para Battalion during the battle for Elaine on 11-12 April. This fighting also involved the 1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion, the 2nd Battalion, 1st Para Light Infantry Regiment, and the 5th Vietnamese Para Battalion.

Despite the French success around Elaine, the situation was getting extremely desperate for the garrison at Dien Bien Phu. By mid-April, food shortages forced them to cut their rations. Critical medical supplies were also running short. Although Operation Condor had been launched from northern Laos, it would take the relief column two weeks to get anywhere near Isabelle. Also, it was hard to imagine how it would prise Giap's vice-like grip from the base. Hopes that the United States Air Force might intervene had been dashed by President Eisenhower. French air force General Lauzin, and his transport commander Colonel Nicot, knew that they could not support both Condor and Dien Bien Phu, but had little choice but to try.



French medics see to a wounded Vietnamese soldier.

Not before time, the French government decided to recognize the efforts of those trapped. The French media was covering the siege and the public were well aware of what was going on. They were captivated by stories of tough legionnaires and paras fending off hordes of communists. Colonel de Castries found himself promoted to brigadier general, while lieutenant colonels Langlais and Lalande were promoted to full colonels, and Major Bigeard to lieutenant colonel. The purpose of these field promotions was not entirely clear.

Meanwhile, Huguette to the northwest of the airfield was under constant attack. Supply drops were becoming ever more difficult, which meant a considerable fall in the tonnages being delivered. For the rest of the month, the Viet Minh continued to wear down the battered defences of Huguette. To make matters even worse for

the French, on 22 April the monsoon season arrived, with heavy rains flooding their remaining strongpoints. The trenches and dugouts became awash in mud and debris. It was at this point that General Navarre abandoned the second phase of Operation Condor.

Giap and his commanders now realized that the time was right. The garrison, with no hope of rescue, and with the supply situation worsening day by day, were sitting ducks. Langlais, Bigeard, de Castries and all the others knew that they had been left to their fate. Talk of escape was ridiculous – where would they go? Brigadier General de Castries was informed that Condor and Vulture had failed and that Albatros was now the garrison's only hope of salvation. At best, up to 3,000 men in three combat groups might fight their way out. These would consist of Langlais with the paratroops, Lemeunier with the legionaries and Lalande with Isabelle's garrison. They would travel light, carrying only four days of rations and their small arms. Every available piece of artillery and mortars, plus fighter-bombers, would support the breakout. The lightly wounded would also provide covering fire. De Castries would remain with the rear guard and the badly wounded.

Leaving late in the day, the intention was that the three breakout groups, once they had reached the cover of the forest, would head southeast to meet elements of Godard's forces, who would move to Muong Nha. De Castries knew that to stand any chance of success, his men would have to break out in all directions to confuse the enemy, and because the tracks heading south could not handle large numbers of men without causing a dangerous bottleneck.

Cogny was against Albatros and with good reason, for he feared that the retreat would turn into a repeat of Lai Chau. The spectacle of French legionnaires and paratroopers being hunted down and annihilated in the jungle was too much to contemplate. Those not killed or captured would become separated and starve. In addition, Colonel de Crèvecoeur in Laos did not believe that Lieutenant Colonel Godard's relief units could get to Muong Nha any earlier than 20 May. It was simply too late. Colonel Dominique Bastiani, Cogny's chief of staff, appreciated the garrison was tired, hungry and demoralized, advising that in the face of a strong enemy and difficult terrain there would be only one outcome. Cogny agreed and felt that the garrison should resist until the very last. This would serve France's sense of honour, especially as the garrison had fought so heroically throughout the battle.

Unfortunately, additional help from the French navy was too little too late. In early April, the navy rushed Flottille 14F to Indochina. Leaving their aircraft at their home base in Bizerte, Tunisia, the pilots and ground crew were flown to Saigon. The American carrier USS *Saipan* delivered former U.S. Marine Vought AU-1 Corsairs for them to fly. This unit was not combat ready until 25 April, its contribution to breaking the siege simply too late. Like its carrier-borne cousin the Bearcat, the Corsairs flew all their missions from land bases.

Those pilots supporting Dien Bien Phu were completely exhausted and were nearing physical breakdown. On 30 April, the French carrier *Bois Belleau* arrived to relieve the *Arromanches*. As well as Squadron 14F, she was supposed to take *Arromanches*'s Squadron 11F. Its pilots, though, had been in combat for four months and were grounded on medical grounds the very next day. A total of just twenty-eight fighters were available, plus twenty-six B-26 bombers and five naval Privateer bombers.



Entrenched Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu.

By the end of the month, the garrison was down to just three days of rations. Ammunition amounted to 275 rounds for the 155s, 14,000 for the 105s and 5,000 for the 120s. It was clear that Dien Bien Phu could not last much longer. Giap ordered a general offensive to commence at 10.00 pm on 1 May. It was time for the kill.



French dead and wounded being gathered – 9,000 were captured.

Even at this late stage, Cogne and Navarre were contemplating sending three more paratroop battalions to reinforce the beleaguered garrison. It is not clear what they hoped these units could achieve – perhaps they vainly thought that if the defenders could inflict enough casualties on Giap, he would be compelled to withdraw. Elements of the 1st Colonial Parachute Battalion were dropped on 2 May. However, the newly arrived 3rd Foreign Legion Parachute and 7th Colonial Parachute battalions were held back, in the delusion that they could support Operation Condor, should it ever be restarted.

The fresh paras could do little to help stem the tide. The weakened positions to the northwest and northeast of the main base area began to fall one by one. A steady flow of farewells kept coming into the command bunker over the radio. On 2 May, bombers and fighters few direct support, plus flak- and artillery-suppression missions, but of the 128 tons of supplies dropped, less than 65 tons were received by the garrison. Frustratingly, the worsening weather conditions forced many of the transport aircraft to return home still fully laden.

It was now that fresh Chinese weapons helped crush and terrify the still defiant garrison. Giap unleashed a new kind of hell on the afternoon of 6 May, when his troops began to bombard the remains of the base with a dozen Chinese six-barrelled rocket launchers. At least two batteries of these were firing from the northeast in the area of Gabrielle and Beatrice. Based on the Second World War German Nebelwerfer, these screeching launchers were only silenced when the clouds dropped over the hilltops. By this stage, the French had just eight 105s and one 155 left, plus six 120mm mortars and dwindling ammunition stocks.

By dawn on 7 May, the garrison had been reduced to an area about half a mile square. The main base had just a single 105 remaining. Remarkably, Bigeard launched a final counterattack with two companies and the last remaining tank. De Castries and Langlais contacted Cogne and Bodet to update them on their situation. They were told to let the



The defeated Dien Bien Phu garrison marches into captivity.

battle 'die' and that there was to be no hoisting of a white flag. At 5.00 pm, de Castries ordered a ceasefire and the remaining installations and ammunition depots to be destroyed. Just thirty minutes later, the command bunker was captured, along with de Castries and twenty-three of his staff officers.

By 6.00 pm, it was all over. The French did not surrender, they were simply overrun.

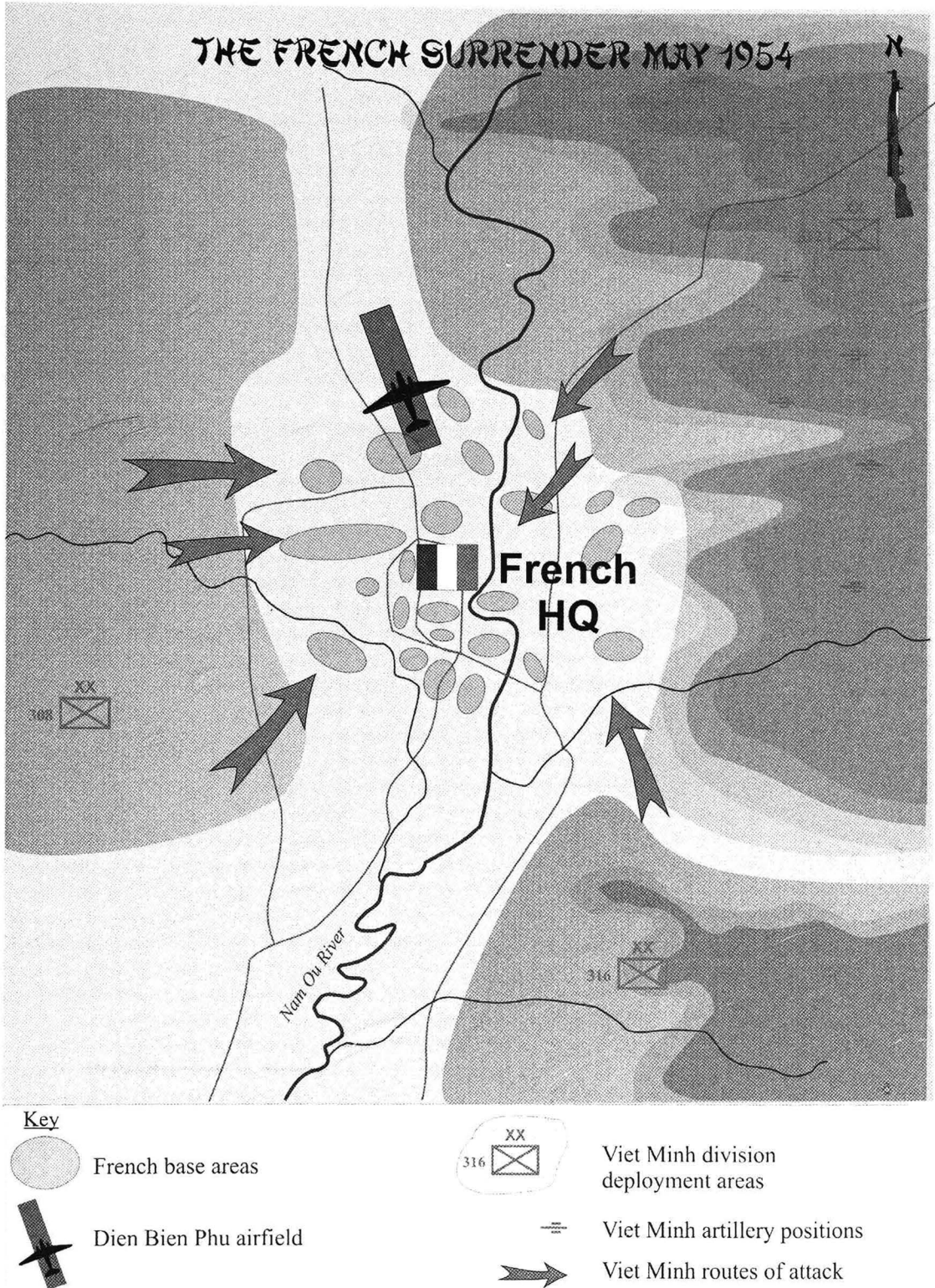
To the south, Lalande and the Isabelle garrison were on their own. They had just two 105s and some 1,700 rounds. At 7.00 pm they destroyed the last of their heavy equipment, including a tank. Initially, Lalande thought they might escape northward to Ban Loi and into the jungle, but then opted to go south instead. That night some of his men tried unsuccessfully to break out, but ran into enemy patrols. By the morning of 8 May 1954, Isabelle had also fallen after Lalande surrendered in the early hours. The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was over.

The French garrison suffered 2,200 killed and 6,450 wounded. Several thousand were missing or had deserted. Around 9,000 ragged survivors were rounded up and taken prisoner. Just seventy-eight managed to escape the Viet Minh cordon, not the 3,000 that had been hoped for. Initially, Giap's losses were estimated to be about 20,000 killed and wounded. De Castries, while in captivity, was later informed that Viet Minh casualties had been nearer 30,000. It was a costly victory.

The Armée de l'Air and the Aéronautique Navale had made a Herculean attempt to break the Viet Minh siege and keep the garrison resupplied. They flew over 10,000 sorties in support of Dien Bien Phu, with 2,650 by the air force's combat aircraft, 1,019 by naval aircraft and 6,700 by the transports. Many of the crews flew upward of 150 combat hours

during April, but it was not enough. Some 86 per cent of the aircraft involved in the battle were damaged, with forty-eight shot down and another fourteen destroyed on the ground.

Surprisingly, and despite the superiority of Giap's artillery, his expenditure of ammunition was not greater than that of the French. The latter estimated the Viet Minh had



expended around 30,000 105mm rounds and around 100,000 other calibres. Much of the old-time, expired Japanese 75mm ammunition proved to be duds and did not explode on impact. French artillery and mortar units fired some 95,000 105mm, 8,500 155mm and 38,000 120mm rounds. Therefore, 130,000 against 141,500. What it meant was that, in terms of calibre and the weight of the round, French firepower had actually been greater. This also does not take into account the tonnage of bombs dropped by the French air force and navy. It makes Giap's victory even more remarkable.

These figures show how French intelligence greatly underestimated Giap's logistical abilities in getting such vast quantities of ammunition to the front. In addition, they illustrate that the French artillery was nowhere near as effective as they had hoped. This was particularly the case with their counter-battery fire, which never silenced even a fraction of Giap's concealed guns.

France's military prestige suffered a shattering blow, equivalent to the loss of Singapore by Britain in 1942. It was now evident to the indigenous peoples that European armies could be defeated. The French military knew that they could not hold on to Indochina any longer – a negotiated withdrawal was the only solution to avoid yet more bloodletting.



Triumphant Viet Minh troops celebrate their stunning but hard-won victory.



USS *Montague* was an Andromeda Class attack cargo ship that assisted with the mass evacuation of Tonkin.

The war cost French Union forces 75,867 dead or missing, including 15,000 North Africans, as well as 65,125 wounded. Around 20,000 of those killed were from metropolitan France, with a large proportion of these officers.

The French Foreign Legion gained particular fame at Dien Bien Phu, where it provided more than half the fighting units – seven out of thirteen – as well as two-thirds of the paratroop contingent. A total of 11,620 legionnaires lost their lives in Indochina. The national armies of the Indochina states fighting for the French suffered a further 31,716 casualties. Giap's Viet Minh lost upwards of 150,000 men while trying to drive the French out. Inevitably, Dien Bien Phu accelerated the peace process.

Just as the news was breaking, French Defence Minister René Pleven found himself attending a dinner party at the British Embassy, which was hosting the Duke of Edinburgh and Field Marshal Montgomery. The despondent Pleven and his wife were an hour late, missing the start of the meal. They were just settling down when Montgomery, never sensitive to others' feelings, exclaimed across the table, 'Well Mister Pleven, what does it feel like to be the most unpopular man in France?'

This was clearly a rhetorical question, but the other dinner guests were stunned. Pleven and the French government had been shamed and he did not need Montgomery or the British revelling in their woes. One diner recalled, 'I shall not forget the moment of ghastly silence which fell on that dinner party!'

Pleven must have gritted his teeth and smiled weakly. His government had asked America and Britain for help in France's moment of need, but it had not been forthcoming. Montgomery should have shown greater tact and, indeed, sympathy for the loss of the French garrison. As an old soldier, he should have known better, but then his jibe had been aimed at a French politician not a French soldier.

17. THE COLD WAR RECKONING

The repercussions of Dien Bien Phu were swiftly felt around the world.

Charles de Gaulle had always been adamant that the loss of Indochina would spell the end of the French empire. He was soon proved right. It spelt not only the beginning of the end for the French Union, but also the Fourth Republic. In Paris, Prime Minister Joseph Laniel's short-lived government fell. He was succeeded by Pierre Mendés-France, who had been a regular opponent of the war in Indochina. He headed for the stalled peace talks in Geneva that were dealing with the troubled issues of Indochina and Korea. The British and Americans tried to support Mendés-France, but there was little to be salvaged from the situation.

Only Ho Chi Minh's powerful allies kept him in check from exploiting his victory even further, but he was prepared to bide his time. China proved a stumbling block to the Viet Minh dominating all of Vietnam, north and south. The Soviets, alarmed at the prospect of the Chinese expanding the war throughout Southeast Asia, applied pressure on Chinese Foreign Secretary Chou En-lai. The Chinese, however, had their own agenda, which had been set well before Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference.

Mendés-France and Chou met on 23 June 1954, without the Vietnamese present, to cut a deal. The terms were not what Ho and his comrades had fought for all those years. When Chou saw the Viet Minh delegation he warned, 'If the Vietnamese continue to fight, they will have to fend for themselves.'

Mao made it clear that if Vietnam's communists continued the war, he would cut off all military support. Pham Vam Dong, Ho Chi Minh's negotiator, was instructed to concede. It was a bitter blow, for it meant the Viet Minh in the south were to give up the struggle.

'I travelled by wagon to the south,' recalled Le Duan, who later became Vietnam's leader. 'Along the way, compatriots came out to greet me, for they thought we had won a victory. It was so painful.'

Nonetheless, Indochina's nationalists achieved almost all their goals with the Geneva Accords of 21 July 1954. Cambodia and Laos had their independence recognized, while Vietnam was divided along the 17th Parallel. This created a formal ceasefire line, which accepted communist control of the north but not the south. Washington was far from happy with this latter concession. To some, it looked like Korea all over again.

British intelligence in March 1954 had accurately forecast the likely scenario if the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, stating:

The Soviet Union and China may be prepared to see an end to the fighting provided that the future of the Viet Minh were assured, either by coalition or partition, but they are unlikely to abandon the Viet Minh in return for any concessions in other fields that we could afford to offer ...

Ho Chi Minh returned triumphant to Hanoi as the leader of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam, consisting of Tonkin and northern Annam. In Saigon, Ngo Dinh Diem formed the pro-Western Republic of South Vietnam from Cochinchina and southern Annam.

The French agreed to withdraw their forces from the north, while the Viet Minh reluctantly withdrew from the south.

The immediate headache for the French was that the Geneva Accords allowed for a 300-day period of free movement between the two Vietnams. Upwards of a million northerners, including around 200,000 French citizens and troops, wanted to move south, while about 150,000 civilians and Viet Min fighters wanted to go the other way. It was an enormous mass movement, with people travelling by land, air and sea. The French navy and air force shifted the bulk of them, though they were also supported by the U.S. Navy.

After Dien Bien Phu, neither the French had the stomach to continue the fight in South Vietnam, nor were the South Vietnamese keen on them staying. The French defence budget was exhausted. In Paris, there was unease that nationalist unrest might break out in France's other colonies, which had long held aspirations of independence. At the end of the Indochina War, the French Expeditionary Corps, numbering approximately 140,000, faced a swift reduction. It was cut to just 35,000 by mid-1955, with many of those withdrawn sent to Algeria. Tellingly, the French military budget for the following year made no mention of Indochina.

America, which from the start had said it would not support British and French colonialism, had nonetheless assisted the French in Indochina. Washington had committed over a billion dollars, two-thirds of which was on equipment delivered straight to the French Expeditionary Corps. The American armed forces, however, had no say in how it was used or what happened to it. President Eisenhower refused to sign the Geneva Accords and moved to support the South Vietnamese army.

By December 1954, formal agreement had been reached between America, France and the Republic of Vietnam for the U.S. to provide aid through its military assistance programme. This included provision for a drastically reduced South Vietnamese armed forces of 100,000 and a joint Franco-American training mission. At the time of the armistice, the Vietnamese armed forces stood at some 205,000 men. These were largely infantry under French officers and non-commissioned officers. When the troops were redeployed from North to South Vietnam, desertion became a major problem. In addition the Vietnamese had no real experience of military logistics, having been dependent on the French for so long.

Tragically, the French desire to be rid of Indochina as quickly as possible sowed the seeds of the Second Indochina War – better known as the Vietnam War. By this stage, trouble was brewing in French North Africa. The French military, understandably, set about cherry-picking the best equipment from Indochina. American personnel were forbidden access to French bases and depots, which meant that they had no idea what was available to the Vietnamese. The French simply took vast quantities of equipment with them, some of it that had been supplied to the Vietnamese under the military assistance programme.

The intention was to ensure that the South Vietnamese forces had full logistical independence by January 1956, but this never happened, nor was it ever really achievable. As the final French withdrawal approached, they dumped tons of old and poorly maintained military materiel on their former Vietnamese allies who did not know how to handle it properly, and containers were opened and piled randomly out in the open. The last French troops left Vietnam on 28 April 1956, having decided that Indochina was no longer their problem.

Washington soon came to the conclusion that in light of the build-up of the Vietnamese communist forces in the North, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam should be maintained at 150,000 strong. Following the departure of the French and the dissolution of the joint training mission, Washington had no choice but to increase its military advisers and its military commitment to South Vietnam. The Cold War was far from over in Southeast Asia.



U.S. Navy LST 516 loading refugees at Haiphong, 1 October 1954.

Predictably, Ho's government announced in December 1960 that the Viet Minh would resume their operations to liberate South Vietnam. In response, President John F. Kennedy sent 686 military advisers to organize the South Vietnamese army, which was to be expanded by 20,000 with American assistance. Slowly but surely America was dragged into the conflict between the two Vietnams.

Ironically, the presence of the Americans ensured China and the Soviet Union did all they could to support Hanoi's desire for unification. In 1968, the U.S. military found itself facing its own Dien Bien Phu at a place called Khe Sanh. On this occasion, though, it was not the main focus of General Giap's massive Tet Offensive. Although Khe Sanh was not overrun and Tet was defeated, the long-term effect was the same.

Further afield, Dien Bien Phu caused an unwelcome chain reaction throughout the French Union. The impact of the French defeat was immediately felt in France's most prized colonial possession – Algeria. The French had always deluded themselves that it was part of metropolitan France. This was a fiction perpetrated to legitimize France's long-standing colonial presence. On VE day in May 1945, an anti-French Muslim demonstration in the Algerian town of Sétif culminated in over a hundred Europeans being butchered. In the weeks that followed, in an orgy of revenge, 6,000 Muslims were killed. Internationally, these events were largely ignored thanks to more pressing matters in Indochina. The Algerians, though, did not forget.

There was also growing unrest in France's other two North African territories: Morocco and Tunisia. These though were protectorates and France had no right to cling to them. During the Indochina War, French units were deployed in both countries. Between 1952–54 these were drawn from Algeria and, afterwards, from forces returning from Indochina. Algeria and Algerian troops had played a key role in Indochina. In particular, the country had provided an enormous training and transit facility. The French military had some 60,000 troops in Algeria, but less than a third were deployable, while two-thirds of them were Muslim colonial forces. To counter any trouble, the French only had about 3,500 combat troops available. It was not enough.

In November 1954, Algerian nationalists began their first coordinated attacks on French military and police installations. The violence soon spread. France could not, and would not, walk away from Algeria, not when it was home to 1.2 million Europeans. Just as importantly, in 1954 oil was discovered in the Sahara, which convinced the French that Algeria was economically vital. Ironically, even French Communists were largely indifferent to Algerian nationalists. They had no desire to support Algerian independence if it was to the detriment of the prosperity of the French working class.

Two years later, Morocco and Tunisia gained independence and the French garrisons withdrew. The two countries inevitably provided safe havens from which Algerian nationalists could operate. The withdrawal from Indochina, Tunisia and Morocco hardened French resolve over *Algérie Française*. This time, the politicians had the full backing of the military. The professional army had learned some very important lessons in Indochina about guerrilla and psychological warfare. Many felt guilty about abandoning their Vietnamese allies, seeing Algeria as an opportunity to avenge Dien Bien Phu and preserve the shrinking French Empire.

By early 1955, the French military had rapidly boosted their Algerian garrison to 74,000 troops. By the summer, there were 105,000. The following year, through the use of reservists, they had expanded their presence to 200,000, vastly more than had ever been

committed to Indochina. This doubled by the end of 1956, a number that was to be maintained until 1962 and Algerian independence. By the end of the brutal conflict, French forces had suffered around 25,000 fatalities, having killed 155,000 Algerian guerrillas.

The French also gained valuable experience using helicopters in Indochina and did much to develop helicopter warfare. At the time of Dien Bien Phu, the French Army only had a single helicopter in Algeria. Three years later, they had assembled a force of eighty. By the end of the conflict in Algeria, the French had 120 transport helicopters in-country, capable of airlifting 21,000 men a month.

In France's sub-Saharan colonies, because the French were focused on Indochina and North Africa, they had allowed a greater degree of devolution. African nationalist energies were expended on each other as they argued over closer association with Paris, loose federation or no relationship at all. By the spring of 1956, the French Union was clearly disintegrating. The associated states had broken free and the African colonies were moving towards self-government. French sovereignty was reduced to only those territories that were ruled as part of France, the old Colonial West Indies, the territories in the Indian Ocean, and troubled Algeria. In 1956, France tried to prove that it was still a world power by joining Britain in the brief Suez War against Nasser's Egypt. It ended in international humiliation for both.

Britain, with its own colonial problems, watched the French defeat in Indochina with interest. Since 1948, it had been fighting to contain a communist insurgency in Malaya. The opening scenario was very similar to Indochina. Originally armed to fight the Japanese, after the Second World War Malaya's communists decided to resist the returning British administration. They were, however, largely drawn from the local ethnic



Troops of the Foreign Legion's 13th Demi-Brigade, Algeria, 1950s.

Chinese population rather than the Malays and Indians. On 16 June 1948, on two rubber estates near Sungei Siput in Perak, three European managers were murdered. As a result, a state of emergency was declared that would last until 1960.

By 1951, the Malayan Races Liberation Army numbered 8,000, though 90 per cent were Chinese. Until this point they were known as 'bandits', but were subsequently dubbed 'CTs' or communist terrorists. Fortunately for Britain, support for the guerrillas by China and the Soviet Union was limited. Unfortunately for the Malayan Communists, China was distracted by the wars in Korea and Indochina, which were right on its doorstep. China had no mutual border with Malaya, thereby making it difficult to provide supplies.

To isolate the insurgents, the British adopted a policy of detention and resettlement – especially with Malaya's Chinese population, which numbered almost two million. At the same time, the British conducted a protracted pacification campaign in the deep jungles and the central mountains. Britain also made it clear that independence would only be granted once the security situation had been restored, but would not surrender the country to the communists. This stance ensured that much of the population continued to support the British presence. This was a situation that the French were never able to replicate in Indochina.

Having gained the upper hand, British forces were keen to avoid the Malayan communists being reinvigorated by the victory at Dien Bien Phu. Between July and November 1954, the British launched their largest operation to date with Operation Termite in Perak, deep inside the jungle east of Ipoh. Also, Operation Apollo was carried out from mid-1954 until mid-1955 in the Kuala Lipis area of Pahang. It was another five years before the Malayan emergency was declared over, by which time the communists had lost 10,684 killed and captured.

To the outside world, Dien Bien Phu confirmed that France was the victim of weak and chaotic government. The Fourth Republic endured twenty-four governments when Britain had four and Germany just one. France remained polarized between the left and the right. The RPF (*Rassemblement pour la France*) made considerable gains, and although de Gaulle relinquished the leadership in 1953, it was still a powerful right-wing force. On the left, the communist party continued to garner about a quarter of the vote. Continuous war had strained the economy, causing a devaluation of the franc in 1957.

The fallout from Dien Bien Phu brought France to the brink of military dictatorship. While de Gaulle was an ardent supporter of the *Union Française*, he had little regard for the pro-Algerian element within the army, as they had backed generals Pétain and Giraud against him in 1943. When in May 1958 it looked as if the government would settle over independence, the military, led by generals Massu and Salan, formed the Committee of Public Safety. It was obvious that France was facing a coup. Through the RPF, de Gaulle brought pressure to bear and was appointed president-premier with dictatorial powers for six months. A new constitution was drafted, giving the president far greater authority.

In October 1958, the Fifth Republic began with a Gaullist Party victory and de Gaulle appointed president for seven years. His period in office until 1969 was essentially one-party rule. The Algerian crisis gave him the opportunity to create riot police and employ secret-service methods that caused widespread condemnation. He also created a new relationship with France's remaining colonies in the French Community. This enabled France to retain close economic links with her former African colonies.

Dien Bien Phu



Men of the Foreign Legion's 13th Demi-Brigade in Algeria in the late 1950s.

In 1954, France was humiliated by its defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Its conventional forces had been defeated by a communist revolutionary war waged by peasant guerrillas backed by Communist China. While the French had striven to defeat the Viet Minh on the battlefield, they had done little to counter their grass-roots ideology. French promises to maintain the French Union, comprising mutually aligned territories, had a hollow appeal to those wanting full independence.

One of the greatest advantages that Giap enjoyed was that, although his men were trained and organized as regulars, with regiments and divisions, they also fought as guerrillas. This meant that they had firm command and control plus the discipline of regular soldiers, rather than being ill-disciplined militia. This discipline was enforced by the iron hand of communist ideology, which insisted on the greater good outweighing the needs of the individual.

In contrast, the French, despite their best efforts with airborne and mobile groups and local militias, never really mastered irregular or counter-insurgency warfare. Thanks to the Second World War and the Cold War, their ethos and doctrine were very much anchored in conventional warfare that was based on fighting set-piece battles. This was what they would have to do if called on to resist the armies of the Warsaw Pact. Ultimately, their lack of adequate off-road mobility and logistical back-up was their undoing in Indochina. It was not until the intervention of the American military, with the concept of air-mobile cavalry using large numbers of helicopters, that the conflict in Vietnam became truly fluid. French adherence to fixed defences at the end of their inadequate logistical lines was never going to be a war-winning formula.

France's persistence in holding ground in Indochina drained its manpower and deprived it of the initiative. Even French mobile units had to rely on vehicles, not aircraft or helicopters, for quick reaction, which had left them constantly vulnerable to ambush. Defeat at Dien Bien Phu destroyed the French Union and the French Empire. Just as importantly, it showed the communist world what was possible. It ensured that, although the Cold War never became hot in Europe, conflict proliferated elsewhere in the world. In France's case it led to the wholly unnecessary war in Algeria and yet more loss of life. Such was the tragedy of Dien Bien Phu. Vietnam, meanwhile, was consigned to yet another war.

EPILOGUE – THE RETURNED

There was no way that General Henri Navarre could survive the disaster of Dien Bien Phu. He and Commissioner General Maurice Dejean were sacked and replaced by General Paul Ely on 3 June 1954. Ely's military deputy was none other than Navarre's predecessor, General Raoul Salan. Navarre retired two years later to write *Agonie de l'Indochine*. General René Cogny held him responsible for what had happened and sued him.

The Geneva agreement secured the release of both sides' prisoners of war by the end of 1954. Cold War and anti-imperialist politics played a part in how this was carried out. Interestingly, the Viet Minh treated those captured differently, depending on where they were recruited. This greatly hampered establishing the precise numbers of those they set free and those unaccounted for.

Only French citizens were handed back directly to the French authorities. The Viet Minh returned a total of about 11,000 captured French troops, of whom 3,900 had been taken at Dien Bien Phu. Discounting the legionnaires, this posed the question of what happened to the rest – some 4,100 men. The French government refrained from causing a fuss, for fear it might impede any future releases.

The legionnaires and African colonial troops were repatriated via China and the Soviet Union to their countries of origin. For example, around 1,000 East European legionnaires were returned to communist-bloc states such as East Germany. Some of them then managed to make their way back to their units. The North and West African recruits, seen as fellow oppressed peoples, were subjected to anti-colonial propaganda and encouraged to support nationalist movements once home. The French were understandably not happy with these arrangements, which deliberately undermined the authority of the French military in Africa.

The Viet Minh viewed the French Indochinese troops as traitors to the cause of nationalism and



Czech native and veteran of the French Foreign Legion, Pavel Knihař fought in French Indochina from April 1949 to April 1953. Here he receives the Médaille Militaire for outstanding military service, 16 July 1955.

independence. Some were later given the chance to fight for communism, some remained incarcerated, some managed to return home, and others died or were killed. In excess of 26,000 Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese (that included Cambodians and Laotians) soldiers remain unaccounted for. This was a stain on French military honour.

Despite overseeing one of France's most shocking military defeats, Christian de Castries's career did not end when he was released. He was quietly sent to West Germany to command the French 5th Armoured Division, before eventually retiring in 1959. Para Pierre Langlais went on to attain the rank of brigadier general, but took his own life in 1986. His comrade, Marcel Bigeard, was sent to Algeria in 1956 to help fight the nationalists. His last military command was in the Central African Republic in the early 1960s. Legionnaire André Lalande fought in Algeria and, likewise, became a brigadier general. Jean Gilles, commander of the airborne troops in Indochina, also survived the scandal and fought during the Suez Crisis and then in Algeria.



The Geneva Accord brought the war in Indochina to an end.

APPENDIX I

FRENCH ORDER OF BATTLE

DIEN BIEN PHU

6 DECEMBER 1953–8 MAY 1954

Far East

Command

French Far East Expeditionary Corps: HQ Saigon

Commander-in-Chief Far East: General Henri Navarre

Commander Far East Air Forces: General Henri Lauzin

Commander Far East Maritime Forces: Admiral Auboyneau

Indochina Command

Land Forces North Vietnam: HQ Hanoi

Commander: General René Cogny

Tactical Air Group North

Commander: General Jean Dechaux

Air Transport

Commander: Colonel Nicot

Land Forces Laos

Commander: Colonel Boucher de Crèvecœur

French Garrison 6 December 1953

Airborne

HQ Airborne Divisional Element

2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Light Infantry Regiment

1st Colonial Parachute Battalion

1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion

5th Vietnamese Parachute Battalion

8th Parachute Shock (Assault) Battalion

17th Airborne Engineers Company

Infantry

3rd T'ai Battalion

Artillery

35th Airborne Artillery Regiment

1st Foreign Legion Heavy Airborne Mortar Company

Laotian Autonomous Artillery Battery

French Garrison 13 March 1954

Commander Operational Group North West: Colonel de Castries
Airborne

1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion (HQ Reserve)

8th Parachute Shock Battalion (HQ Reserve)

Infantry

1st Battalion, 13th Foreign Legion Demi-Brigade ('Claudine')

3rd Battalion, 13th Foreign Legion Demi-Brigade ('Beatrice')

1st Battalion, 2nd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment ('Huguette')

3rd Battalion, 3rd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment ('Isabelle')

2nd Battalion, 1st Algerian Rifle Regiment ('Isabelle')

3rd Battalion, 3rd Algerian Rifle Regiment ('Dominique')

5th Battalion, 7th Algerian Rifle Regiment ('Gabrielle')

1st Battalion, 4th Moroccan Rifle Regiment ('Elaine')

2nd T'ai Battalion ('Elaine')

3rd T'ai Battalion ('Anne-Marie')

T'ai Partisan Mobile Group No.1 (Francoise and other strongpoints)

Artillery

2nd Group (i.e., 2nd Battalion), 4th Colonial Artillery Regiment ('Claudine' & 'Dominique')

3rd Group (3rd Battalion), 10th Colonial Artillery Regiment ('Claudine' & 'Isabelle')

11th Battery, 4th Group, 4th Colonial Artillery Regiment ('Claudine')

1st Foreign Legion Heavy Airborne Mortar Company ('Claudine')

1st Foreign Legion Composite Heavy Mortar Company ('Gabrielle')

2nd Foreign Legion Composite Heavy Mortar Company ('Anne-Marie')

Tanks

3rd Squadron, 1st Light Horse Regiment

French Airborne Reinforcements 13 March–May 1954

1st Colonial Parachute Battalion (incomplete)

2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Light Infantry Regiment

2nd Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion

5th Vietnamese Parachute Battalion

6th Colonial Parachute Battalion

3rd, 5th & 6th airborne surgical teams

Note: This orbat does not include the French air force, army aviation, naval aviation, intelligence, and the numerous support units involved in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

APPENDIX II

Viet Minh Order of Battle Vietnam People's Army Dien Bien Phu 13 March–8 May 1954

Central Command

Commander-in Chief: General Vo Nguyen Giap
Chief of Staff: General Hoang Van Thai

‘Nam Dinh’

304th Infantry Division: General Hoang Sam
9th Infantry Regiment:
353rd, 375th & 400th battalions
57th Infantry Regiment:
265th, 346th & 418th battalions
(third regiment not committed)
345th Artillery Battalion

‘Viet Bac’

308th Infantry Division: General Vuong Thua Vu
36th Infantry Regiment:
80th, 84th & 89th battalions
88th Infantry Regiment:
23rd, 29th & 322nd battalions
102nd Infantry Regiment:
18th, 54th & 79th battalions

‘Ben Tre’

312th Infantry Division: General Hoang Cam
141st Infantry Regiment:
11th, 16th & 428th battalions
165th Infantry Regiment:
115th, 542nd & 564th battalions
209th Infantry Regiment:
130th, 154th & 166th battalions
154th Artillery Battalion

‘Bien Hoa’

316th Infantry Division: General Le Quang Ba
98th Infantry Regiment:
215th, 439th & 933rd battalions

174th Infantry Regiment:
249th & 251st battalions
176th Infantry Regiment:
888th, 970th & 999th battalions
980th Artillery Battalion
812th Heavy Weapons Company

Support

351st Heavy Division (Reinforced): General Vu Hien
45th Artillery Regiment:
950th & 954th battalions
675th Artillery Regiment:
83rd, 175th & 275th battalions
367th Anti-aircraft Regiment
237th Heavy Weapons Regiment
151st Engineer Regiment
Field Rocket Unit (unidentified)
148th Independent Infantry Regiment:
910th & 920th battalions, plus 121st Heavy Weapons Company



Lieutenant Colonel Bigeard and Colonel Langlais on release from captivity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Tucker-Jones is a former defence intelligence officer and a widely published expert on regional conflicts, counter-terrorism and armoured and aerial warfare. He is the author of over thirty books including *The Vietnam War: The Tet Offensive 1968*, *The Gulf War: Operation Desert Storm 1990–1991*, *The Afghan War: Operation Enduring Freedom 2001–2014* and *The Iraq War: Operation Iraqi Freedom 2003–2011*. He is security and terrorism correspondent for *intersec – The Journal of International Security*. His website can be found at www.atuckerjones.com.

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Cover design: Jon Wilkinson

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